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DEDICATED TO

CORI GREY

Harnessing Chaos could not exist
without you. Everyday, I am grateful
for your influence, love, and
encouragement.

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FOREWORD

I'D WANTED TO WRITE A SELF-CONTAINED STORY leading into the events of the Harnessing Chaos series but was unsure of what that would look like and how it would play out. This story would have a broader scope and follow a varied cast of characters compared to the main series where each story was told from the perspective of the title character.

I didn't know where to begin.

I'd just released the first book in the Harnessing Chaos series, *Moki and the Erased Ones*, and was busy marketing and promoting the launch myself while also working full-time as a graphic designer at a job I was fast growing to hate. My employment had become precarious, uncertain, and adversarial. Mirroring the state of the larger world that barked aggressively at me

through my smart phone, my computer screen, and my television.

Daily, I was forcibly subjected to images of inhuman cruelty and barbarity from which I could not escape. At the office, tasks continued and deadlines loomed but the atrocities of the world were unceasing. I watched drone footage of a soldier being incinerated by a flamethrower attached to the drone. I saw images of Palestinian parents holding the tattered remains of what little was left of their children after Israeli bombs turned refugees' tents into gaping craters. And then I had to go to my 2pm marketing meeting and pitch ideas to multiple levels of middle-managers who all made significantly more than me while contributing little more than to fill a seat in meetings, nodding intermittently while chewing on a pen, and forwarding emails up the corporate ladder.

I felt numb and angry and hopeless and every other emotion I could feel at once. My work-self became a costume that I begrudgingly donned every morning and removed the instant I could. I was just sort of existing within my corporate space while also disappearing and dissolving away.

As a neurodivergent student of history, I recognized the patterns everywhere and the weight of the implication those patterns had for myself and the larger world.

I'd travelled to British Columbia to attend a funeral. I was struck by the lack of emotions I felt for the finality of the situation I know I should have been feeling but

found myself incapable. At the airport, I'd bought a non-fiction book about the life of a scribe in Florence during the Renaissance. I couldn't put it down. I was engrossed in the world of manuscript copying before the advent of the printing press. Whenever I could, I would sneak away and read by myself. I ended up finishing the entire book by the time I returned home. I remember jotting down a few notes and prompts and wrote some isolated scenes but the central narrative remained elusive.

At the time of writing the original Harnessing Chaos series, Kerosi's backstory was only vaguely defined but after reading about the Florentine scribe I knew her story would involve manuscript copying and the preservation of ancient knowledge.

In the real world, wars continued to rage on and the grotesque images they birthed relentlessly assaulted my social media feeds influencing how I wrote the Aq'Adezean Republic and the Tulean Imperium, the Azai refugees and the A'ji insurrectionists. I began writing in earnest and realized that the story I wanted to tell would be considerably longer than other entries in the Harnessing Chaos series. Instead, the book became the first entry in the prequel trilogy: *Children of the Crimson Insurrection*.

In 2024, just after releasing the first book in the prequel trilogy, I was unceremoniously let go from my design job and was once again unemployed. I felt the darkness of my situation as I doom-scrolled in-between my frantic job hunting. The violent chaos of unceasingly unfolding world events continued to

populate my various social media feeds and accelerate my emotional decline and disconnectedness. I tried to get back into watercolour painting but my creative energy was tapped and I spent a lot of time alternating between big and small screens and sleep.

I felt extreme guilt for once again placing my wife in the position of sole income provider as I so often seemed to. The canyon between the artistic and creative being I saw myself as and the capitalist drone I was expected to be was discouragingly vast. I knew in my soul that if I was only given a chance, if someone would just experience the world I'd created, they would *understand*. But externally, I struggled with how I could ever be seen as anything but a failure in the eyes of capitalism and the eyes of those I loved.

With our savings rapidly depleting, I desperately sent out resumes to any place I could apply but kept getting ghosted by employers or strung along over multiple interviews only to be told that I was “too qualified” or “not the right fit for the current role but we’ll keep your resume on file”.

Finally, we had reached that discouraging point where we were in danger of not being able to make our mortgage payments, I finally landed a part-time job. I was only getting 25-30 hours a week but the added income allowed us space to breathe a bit.

I spent the summer reconnecting with myself, my wife, and my family after being closed-off and insular for so long. I still doom-scrolled my way through the exterior world but my personal life was wonderful. I

felt energized again, almost possessed, and wrote the final two novels in the trilogy in the space of a few months. Many elements of the final story emerged organically in ways I found surprising as if they could only have appeared under these specific circumstances. The experience instilled a calmness in me that allowed me to relax my self-imposed compulsion to always be pushing forward and creating.

The peace that came with recognizing that “things will happen when they are supposed to happen” was cathartic and overdue. I took some time to be introspective and take in the path I’d taken over the past twenty years. I realized then how the moments I was ignoring for the sake of perceived forward progression were the very moments that my younger self had dreamed and pleaded for. My 20-year-old self would have been astounded that I was a published author. Yet, 40-year-old me had already dismissed that achievement and was consumed with writing the *next* novel. I had not stopped to appreciate just what an accomplishment publishing a book was and how many other artistic projects I’d already created in the past two decades.

My unemployment came to an end in the fall of 2024 and gradually my wife and I began to rebuild from the precariousness of our situation. I released part two of *Children of the Crimson Insurrection* in October of 2024 and part three in January of 2025 accompanied by the launch of the official website HarnessingChaos.ca

If the past two decades were the era of forcing

myself to be unceasingly productive, the next twenty years will be the era of mindful cultivation of sustainable creativity and self-expression.

Creation gives me life but I will no longer kill myself to be creative.

- Joel Grey

2025

CHILDREN
OF THE
CRIMSON
INSURRECTION
PART I

CHAPTER 1

KEROSI LEISURELY ENJOYED THE SLOW MOVEMENT of the fog slithering through the trees as she drank her tea. She sat on the balcony of her apartment taking in the scent of petrichor radiating out from the forest as it blended with the warm, spicy aroma rising from her cup. The tea merchant had presented her with aromatic varieties procured from northern Aq'Adez featuring dried leaves from various plants that only existed on the mainland.

Apparently, she *had* visited the mainland once when she was a child though she'd been too young to remember the experience. She'd read about what life was like in Aq'Adez, Tul, and the other realms of Asmita but they were only symbols on parchment to her.

Her mother, Kyowa, was a mainlander. She'd left the island when Kerosi was just a child. Kerosi had stayed with her father on the island where he worked at the Azai Grand Library. It was rare that an islander and a mainlander would join so it was unsurprising that her mainlander mother would return to Aq'Adez. Her father rarely talked about her mother despite Kerosi's curiosity. All Kerosi truly knew about her mother was that she'd been a cartographer who'd travelled to the island to visit the library and that her name was Kyowa. She saw the ache in her father's heart whenever she'd mention her mother so she gradually stopped entirely.

When she became old enough, Kerosi joined her father at the library. At first, it was just cataloging new arrivals to the already staggeringly expansive collection. As she grew older, Kerosi began training to become a manuscript copier.

Original documents were safely stored in an underground repository. Only the copies of works were on display or for sale to visitors of the Azai Grand Library. The reproductions, though, were meticulously and lovingly created to be as close to the original documents as possible. Extensive instruction and many Os¹ of practice were required to attain a level of proficiency in the craft before acolytes were allowed to officially become members of the guild.

¹ One year in the world of Te'a is called an **Os** (OSS). A day is called an **ossa** (OSS-uh). Each seven ossa week is called a **senix** (SENN-icks). Every six senix month is called a **urix** (YEW-ricks). There are six urix in one **Os**.

At the start, she'd created many unsatisfactory copies for every one that was accepted. Now, nearly every one of her reproductions was lauded for their likeness to their originals. As young as she was, her guild signature on the spine of a reproduction was a symbol of quality and skillful attention to detail. Her reproductions were sought after by casual readers, collectors, and scholars alike. She'd become somewhat of a fledgling celebrity in the literary world but had not yet achieved the independence of some of the more senior guild members who could choose which pieces they copied.

Kerosi's favourite pieces to work on were from the *early kingdom*. They came from a time far enough in the past when texts were still imbued with grandiose themes of adventure, bravery, and romance. They often had a mythical quality that was conspicuously lacking in the writing of *middle kingdom* texts that were far more subdued, dry, and scholarly. Early kingdom texts were also illuminated in such a way that the symbols were more flowery and ornamental. They flowed with an aesthetic that the middle kingdom texts could not compete with. Other copiers tended to prefer the middle kingdom texts because they were so consistent and uniform.

Kerosi found them exceedingly boring.

At the moment, Kerosi was switching back and forth between three pieces. The first two were historical

texts from the middle kingdom that were engorged with dates of important battles and the names of long-dead generals, officials, and other mediocre Y'nari² whose accomplishments were only important because they were privileged Pod'ka³ from dynastic families. Kerosi found it hard to force herself to prioritize work on those particular texts as the third text was a far more exciting piece from the early kingdom surrounding the adventures of seafaring Y'nari who'd left the chaos of the mainland to explore the islands that would later become the kingdom of the Azai. When she'd last stopped, Kerosi had been copying a section about how Grix, *the Shipmaster* and founder of the Azai, had brought the refugees to the centre of the island where they broke ground on the capital, Qisaq. Where most other acolytes would read as they copied, Kerosi liked to read ahead and finish the entire piece before she started work on reproducing it.

Kerosi was excited to reach the part in the story where Grix and a fierce group of rebels fought off the

²The primary inhabitants of Te'a are the *Y'nari* (ee-NARR-ee). In the Age of Chaos, there are 7 races of Y'nari: *Sun'Ynarr* (soo-NEE-narr) *Mok'Ynarr* (mo-KEE-narr) *Qiat'Ynarr* (kee-ah-TEE-narr) *Ysat'Ynarr* (ee-suh-TEE-narr) *Vol'Ynarr* (vahl-EE-narr) *Osk'Ynarr* (oss-KEE-narr) *Tul'Ynarr* (tewl-EE-narr)

³Gender is rigidly categorized as either *Pod'ka* (poad-KA) or *ur'ka* (er-KA). Deviation from these two categories in public is a taboo that will attract the eyes of the Tulean Inquisition, *the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos* (sen-DARR-iss er-EBB-oss), who are tasked with keeping Tul *pure*. Those who do deviate from the binary call themselves *uk'Sanpo* (ook-SAN-poe) meaning: *my own soul*. Within Tul, uk'Sanpo are derogatorily referred to as *K'uk'pa'uk* (KAH-ook-pah-ook) meaning: *outside and beneath*.

incursion of Tul'Ynarr who'd been aggressively persuing the seafaring refugees since they'd first fled the red coastal sands of the mainland. There was a unique portion of the text where the illuminated symbols of Grix's name were formed to create a towering, red-inked statue that loomed over the rest of the black symbols on the page. The collection of symbols looked curiously similar to the statue of Grix that stood proudly over the Azai marina. The statue was called *the Shipmaster's Tower*. She wondered if the tower was constructed before the text or if the text had influenced the construction of the tower as both were created around the same time.

Earlier, she'd copied a manuscript that had given a much more academic perspective of the events which the text called *the Crimson Insurrection of Grix*. That middle kingdom account was probably more factual than the early kingdom text she was currently reproducing but it didn't have the soul or the vivacity of the latter.

Texts from the early kingdom also tended to feature full-page illustrations, intricate maps, and other more creative elements that middle kingdom texts heavily simplified or omitted completely.

Kerosi's father often joked that she should've been a painter or an artist instead of a manuscript copier. She did dabble in her leisure time but absolutely loved the Azai Grand Library and the work she did with the guild. As well, the knowledge she had access to was

uncommon for someone of her age and gender.

Through her training, she was able to learn six languages. Two of which were no longer spoken. She understood the geopolitical landscape of Te'a throughout the various ages, which gave her a unique understanding of the history of the Azai and their place in the larger world. If Kerosi *had* to work on something from the middle kingdom, she hoped for pieces regarding the *First Imperium* era of mainland history immediately after *the Green Wave*. That period held an endearing, fantastical quality for her that bordered on the mythological. She felt an unusual affinity to the period like a nostalgia for a time she'd never known. Sources disagreed about whether the Azai islands had existed before the Green Wave or if the geographical features were violently pushed up from the depths of the Koris Sea in the aftermath of the cataclysm.

Kerosi noticed she'd reached the bottom of her tea and placed the empty cup on the table beside her. She stretched and yawned as she rose from her seat to start her ossa.

When she arrived at the Library, there were other acolytes already dutifully reproducing manuscripts in various areas of the hall. There were stations set up for copiers to work close together but there were also cubicles where the more introverted Y'nari could copy peacefully away from others. It depended on the ossa but Kerosi enjoyed working beside others so she could

see what piece they were working on.

Kerosi enjoyed frequent distractions. Until she didn't. If it was a particularly difficult project, she preferred to work on it early in the *ossa* or late into *Qi'Ar*⁴ when most people were still asleep. That *ossa*, she was feeling sociable and curious about others' work.

Tela, a copier of her own age whom she called a close friend, had just completed a manuscript and was returning from the hall with a new project. Tela sat down beside Kerosi and opened her new tome to the first page before laying out her copying tools and parchment.

"What were you assigned?" Kerosi asked, excitedly.

"It just arrived from an excavation in *Aq'Adez*," Tela said. "The Guild Delegator said it was an *Aklis* bestiary."

"An *Aklis*!" Kerosi cheered as loudly as she could in such a quiet space.

Aklis had been an ancient historian who'd travelled the breadth of *Asmita* cataloging flora and fauna of the time. There was a debate on just how much of his writing was embellished for entertainment value and

⁴Each *ossa* [day] is broken into six parts:

O'sa (OH-suh) Dawning

Sota (SO-tah) Glowing

Ki (KEE) Pyre

Ardos (AR-doe-ss) Dimming

Pen'ar (peh-NARR) Ember

Qi'Ar (kee-YARR) Slumber

They are also the names of the six ***urix*** [months of the year].

how much of his writing factually represented real events. Enough of his writings had survived and could be independently verified that scholars believed his writing was *mostly* true.

There was an Aklis that featured a reclusive race of flying Y'nari who were said to live high up in the A'Yrr Mountains. Another said there were insect-like beings who attach themselves to Y'nari to use as hosts. Academia labelled both stories as legend and myth.

Other volumes described more mundane phenomena like the behaviours of nun'bak and the variations one could find throughout Asmita⁵. Such content was easily verified as factual as any Y'nari could confirm what was written through practical observation.

Recently, a beast had been moved from the mythological category and into the factual category when *Whistlers* were discovered in the Feros Woods. An Aklis described Whistlers as savage forest monsters who would lure their prey with a haunting melody. A group of merchants had gotten lost on the trade route that ran from Tul through the Feros Woods on the way to southern Aq'Adez when they heard the whistling.

⁵The world of *Harnessing Chaos* is called **Te'a** (tay-AH). It is broken up into three regions. The first region is called **Asmita** (OSS-me-tuh). It is a band of permanent dusk that wraps around the world and is the only of the three regions that is consistently habitable. Asmita is where the majority of life exists on Te'a. To one side of Asmita is **Ovin** (AW-veen) a scorched expanse of perpetual light. Ovin's forbidden wastes hide a technological oasis obscured by time and memory. The other side is a region called **Vol** (VAHL). Vol is an icy, desolate landscape of eternal night.

They followed the sound until they were attacked. Three of the party had been killed before the mercenaries embedded with the travelling merchants could take the beast down. They'd hauled the carcass along with them to the next trade centre where the mythic *Whistler* was extensively studied and the legends became truth.

Kerosi herself had copied an Aklis early on in her career. It was about the various grasses and herbs found in *the Swamp of Sug'Ogg*. It included chapters about the medicinal properties of ferns in the inner swamp and how a group of Sun'Ynarr called *the Xen'Oggos* lived as protectors of the swamp. The descriptions of their society's unique infrastructure and their communal tribal culture had made Kerosi curious enough to want to leave the island and experience it for herself while also remaining cautious enough for her to be content to simply read about it from the safety of the island.

"I skimmed through the Aklis on the way to the hall and it looks like this project will require a lot of red ink," Tela said while cheerfully giving Kerosi a knowing nod.

Manuscript copiers were expected to know how to make their own supplies. It was a matter of personal pride that one use ink from ingredients harvested by the scribe themselves. The crimson ink was created from a vibrantly pink flower that grew in the highlands of the island and ground together with lowland wheat of a deep purple colour in a mortar and pestle until

it became a paste. Then, seawater was added to the mixture and let set in a wide shallow bowl to become what copiers called: *Azai red*.

“Are you up for an adventure?” Tela smiled.

CHAPTER 2

BOKIS COULD SEE THE OMINOUS, grey silhouettes of Imperium ships in the distance. He watched from the ramparts of the outer city as the convoy slowly grew against the horizon. An Azai vessel carrying Emissary Imot had hastily docked in the marina on the north side of the island. The beacon atop *the Shipmaster's Tower* had been lit the moment the Azai crew disembarked indicating imminent danger. He could see the black dot of Emissary Imot racing up the main road from the marina with what would obviously be dire news. The tower's beacon had never been lit as long as Bokis had been a part of the outer city watch.

As Gate Watch Captain, Bokis had already sent word to each of the seven districts of the island before

he'd even heard from Imot. Bokis was still squinting at the fast-approaching silhouettes as Emissary Imot hurriedly dismounted beneath the guard tower; nearly as out of breath as his nun'bak. Bokis pulled his gaze away from the ships and took the steep stone steps down the guard tower stairs three at a time.

"The ships?" Bokis called to the Emissary.

"The Imperium," Imot huffed; still trying to catch his breath.

Bokis was confusedly stammering before he collected himself enough to continue: "But the treaty."

"There are no longer any treaties," Imot scowled as he impatiently smoothed the folds and wrinkles of his Emissary robes.

Bokis then noticed that the cuffs of Imot's robes were stained with splotches of red. Imot's face was pale and his eyes were wild.

"Emissary Koth?" Bokis breathed.

Imot shook his head somberly.

There was a loud crack that snapped at their ears. Both of them instinctively ducked. They could feel the forceful rush of hot air against their necks. Bokis rose and turned to the marina to see the many merchant vessels rocking chaotically in the waves; consumed by flames.

There was a silent bright flash from the lead Imperium ship. A roiling sphere of fire arced toward the Shipmaster's Tower. Before it connected, the delayed

sound from the far off ship finally caught up with a violent pop. The earsplitting crack shook the frazzled Emissary and the Watch Captain.

When the flame sphere exploded against the Shipmaster's Tower, the sound took much less time to reach their ears. The noise arrived nearly the same moment that the puff of hot air struck their faces.

"Are they assembled?" Imot turned to Bokis, his face already wore a grave expression of defeat.

Bokis shook his head. "I've only just sent word to the districts. I don't think they'd have received the messengers yet."

"I'll meet the officials at the capitol. We must begin the evacuation," Imot said mournfully before remounting and charging off deeper into the island.

There was another cacophonous explosion that shook the ground.

Bokis turned to see a visibly frightened soldier standing at attention against the gate.

"Bring a message to the defensive line to start the evacuation beginning with those behind the third and fourth gates," Bokis instructed.

"Sir?" The soldier started to protest. "What about the marina? What about all those in the outer villa--"

Bokis looked out at the chaos with a blank, haunted stare before raising a hand to silence the terrified soldier.

"We need to start reinforcing the gates before

the Imperium makes landfall,” Bokis explained. “If we concentrate our efforts on the third gate, it should give us enough time to evacuate the majority of Qisaq and the inner cities.”

“But there are four villages between the third gate and second gate alone! There are dozens of farms lining the main road from the first gate to the marina.” The soldier decried. “That’s not even counting the-”

“Don’t you think I know that,” the Gate Watch Captain barked.

Bokis took a moment to calm himself before he continued. He saw how agitated the shaking young soldier was.

“You have family in the outer villages?” Bokis asked but already knew the answer.

The soldier nodded meekly.

Bokis acknowledged that this poor soldier would never have seen conflict before and his military training had only ever been theoretical. At best, the soldier would have practiced against stationary dummies made of wood and straw. The many generations of peace had caused the politically neutral island kingdom of the Azai to deprioritize or outright neglect any training for its vestigial military.

The Imperium, in contrast, was perpetually at war. If not externally, then internally. They trained their young in brutal, merciless military academies starting soon after they were able to hold a sword and stand

upright in armour.

“This is going to be a slaughter,” Bokis whispered to himself.

“Sir?”

Another riotous explosion shook the island.

Bokis raced over to the stable where a row of six-legged nun'baks were tied to a wooden railing. He mounted the nearest one and adjusted himself in the saddle.

“You have your orders,” Bokis said.

The young soldier stood rigid, petrified.

Bokis dug his spurs to the sides of his nun'bak and galloped off down the road toward the explosions.

CHAPTER 3

THE SMOKE IN THE AIR STUNG THEIR NOSTRILS before they could see the flames. The instant the scent had entered her nose, Kerosi felt the dark weight of irreversible change that was pressing down upon them. Tela and Kerois emerged from the underbrush at the edge of the clearing to see Qisaq ablaze.

Tela gasped and dropped the bundle of pink flowers she'd been cradling in her arms. They fell silently to the ground as the grotesque sound of the Imperium invasion raced toward them. A fleet of grey ships disembarked in the smouldering marina. The black dots of soldiers, in the distance were scurrying around the charred remains of Grix's once triumphantly majestic statue,

the Shipmaster's Tower, that had stood steadfastly protecting the entrance to the island since its erection in the generations ago.

From their vantage point high above Qisaq, they could see that the first four gates had been breached. What little Azai defences remained were easily overpowered by the onslaught of black dots charging up the main road into Qisaq. A ways out into the Koris sea, Imperium ships were launching bright spheres of fire that exploded against the outer city walls with some reaching Qisaq itself.

"The library!" Tela screamed.

Kerosi followed Tela's gaze to see smoke rising from the Azai Grand Library. The two exchanged worried, disbelieving glances before shooting off down the aged, uneven path back down to Qisaq.

Hysterical citizens were being corralled deeper into the city by absurdly unprepared Azai soldiers where ancient, unused military barracks built into the mountain were serving as improvised shelters. Kerosi knew that the many generations of disuse blended with Qisaq's unpreparedness meant the shelters would be chaotic and overcrowded. Both Tela and Kerosi skirted the directions of the fumbling Azai soldiers who were manically directing them to follow the crowd into the shelters.

Tela followed a few steps behind Kerosi as they pushed against the flow of terrified citizens and the

ineffectual soldiers who smashed past them. Kerosi pulled Tela into an alley which was narrow enough that they could use the tight space to scale the brick walls to the roofs of the apartment buildings lining the main road. They leapt from rooftop to rooftop and began to feel the heat of the flames against their cheeks as they neared the library.

“Father,” Kerosi whispered.

Groups of Imperium soldiers escorted guild members outside the burning library and deposited them in the courtyard where another group of Imperium soldiers stood guard. She stole glances but couldn’t see her father among the guild members in the courtyard while she tried to find a way inside.

Tela watched numbly as Imperium soldiers were carrying armfuls of scrolls, tomes, and manuscripts from inside the library and were dumping them onto a pyre in the centre of the courtyard.

“Tela!” Kerosi pulled on her arm to jerk her from her pained stupor.

No one was in the copiers’ hall when Tela and Kerosi entered. The flames seemed to be concentrated on the eastern side of the library where the majority of the manuscript copies were displayed for the public. Kerosi thought about rushing over to pick up the original manuscripts on the nearest workstation but then saw all the others splayed open on all the various workstations and became overwhelmed. She fell to her

knees and began sobbing.

She wondered which works she should try and save.

Manuscripts of culture? Of knowledge? Of philosophy? Of history? What took precedence? How could I possibly decide?

This time, it was Tela who was pulling on her.

She was frantically whispering to her that she could hear soldiers coming but Kerosi was still trapped inside the indecision within her mind.

“We need to go now!” Tela stressed sternly as quietly as she could.

Tela pulled her to her feet before Kerosi could make her impossible decision and now any choice had been taken away entirely. She heard the loud crash of soldiers thrashing around the copiers’ hall the moment they entered the side passage that led to the acolytes’ quarters. They passed empty bunk beds with their sheets spilling haphazardly from them. Light began flickering behind them and Kerosi heard the roar of flames as the Imperium soldiers set the hall alight.

She could hear the voices of the soldiers and they seemed to be looking for something specific.

“What does *erosikai* mean?” Tela asked.

Kerosi shrugged but most of her attention was on reaching the upper study on the third floor of the library where the more senior guild members’ offices were. She hoped she’d find her father there.

They found the stairwell impassable as flames were blocking access to the second floor. She could see the flames rising from the stairwell were licking up at the boards beneath the third floor. They exited the library through an open window and carefully pulled themselves along the exterior of the library in search of another way to reach the third floor. That section of the Grand Library hung over the edge of a cliff that dropped down into the sea below them. The grand view from inside the library looking out at the sea had been one of serenity and beauty. Now, hanging with a white-knuckled grip from the outside of the library, Kerosi could feel only vertigo and terror. Tela would not look down and moved in tense, slow, and uncertain movements.

Tela and Kerosi clambered past the support beams before pulling themselves over the lip of the architecture onto the second-floor roof. They needed to once again climb out over beams that hung over the great drop into the sea before they could reach a window on the third floor that might give them access to the upper study. Their muscles burned and ached and Kerosi almost leaped inside the moment her hand touched the window sill but Tela gently tugged on Kerosi's sleeve. Not hard enough to cause Kerosi to fall into the crashing waves below, but enough to alert her of the danger.

A group of Imperium soldiers raced past the window and down the hallway. Together, Tela and

Kerosi clung to the exterior of the Azai Grand Library silently waiting for the soldiers to pass. One of the soldiers broke off from the group and stood directly in front of the window with his back to them.

Kerosi looked over to see Tela's arms shaking as her tenuous grip on the ornate wooden mouldings was faltering. There were more shouts from deeper inside the library and the soldier left his post by the window and sped off down the hall.

"I'm slipping," Tela yelled.

Kerosi wrapped one arm around the wooden support beam jutting out from the building and braced her legs against the exterior. With her free arm, she guided Tela's legs to rest her feet on Kerosi's bent knees. Kerosi then helped push Tela over the window sill and into the Grand Library. Once Tela was inside she was able to pull Kerosi in after her.

"What do we have here?" A raspy, dark voice sneered as Kerosi landed against the hot tiles of the hallway outside the upper study.

"They're just children," a soldier said but was silenced by a Pod'ka in grey and yellow robes.

"That's exactly who I would entrust with protecting something like the erosikai," he smiled. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Tela asked.

"Don't play coy, little ur'ka," the foul Pod'ka barked. "We know it's here. We're not against burning this entire island down to retrieve it."

“Aros,” the soldier started to protest.

“*Grokix* Aros,” the Pod’ka in grey and yellow robes corrected.

Kerosi’s eyes widened.

She’d read about *Grokix* in the military histories of the early Imperium. They were powerful sorcerers who harnessed supernatural energy called *wu’jik*. By the middle kingdom, the mystical *wu’jik* casters had fallen into obscurity and their talents were seemingly lost to time. She’d assumed that the *Grokix* were more mythological than historical but she could feel a dark energy radiating out from the robed Pod’ka and instantly knew they were terrifyingly real.

“*Grokix* Aros,” the soldier repeated sheepishly. “We are running short of time. If the *erosikai* is here-“

“It is here and I think these two know exactly where it is,” the vile Pod’ka hissed. “Even if they don’t realize they do.”

Grokix Aros reached a long, gangly arm out to grasp Tela and pull her to him. Kerosi immediately protested but the soldier beside gripped both Kerosi’s wrists tightly and violently jerked her back. Tela’s eyes were alight with fear as *Grokix* Aros’ sickly, pale hand palmed her forehead. Tela screamed as a green light erupted from the sorcerer’s hand.

“Stop!” Kerosi pleaded. “What are you doing?”

“I know it’s in here somewhere,” *Grokix* Aros eyes glowed that same sickly green as his palm.

Kerosi could see the colour of Tela's hair was subtly changing; becoming somehow dull and almost grey.

The soldier restraining Kerosi let out a pained scream and his eyes exploded in blinding, blue light. The light stung Kerosi's vision even though she hadn't been looking directly at the soldier. The grip on Kerosi's wrists relaxed and she dropped to the floor. When she turned back, the soldier's eye sockets were empty and the skin around them was sizzling and popping angrily.

Grokix Aros released Tela in a mix of confusion and panic.

"You?"

The screaming soldier collapsed to his knees revealing a solitary figure wearing inconspicuous, ragged clothes who stepped purposefully past Kerosi and toward the sorcerer.

The Grokix used both hands to conjure a sparking green orb of energy that grew between his palms. The Grokix shouted at the approaching figure as he launched the orb. The solitary figure deflected the energy effortlessly down the hallway where it erupted in a flash of heat and flame that immediately set the walls ablaze.

The figure gripped the Grokix by the throat and lifted him off the ground. With their other hand, the figure began drawing out the green energy from inside the sorcerer making his eyes pull back into his head and his cheeks shrink tight against his teeth. When there was

almost nothing left to the sorcerer but a skeletal husk, there was a bright pop of energy that slapped outward. The force knocked the limp body of the blinded soldier clear across the hallway and launched Tela deeper into the burning library. The blast knocked Kerosi backward. Slamming her hard against the window sill. The energy of the blast swung her body over the lip of the window and sent her flailing wildly into the riotous crashing of waves below.

CHAPTER 4

BOKIS HAD ONLY MADE a few nun'bak strides beyond the first gate when he realized that the Imperium was already in control of the marina and the farmland. He could see soldiers throwing torches onto the thatching of buildings. Others were setting fire to the purple wheat fields while farmers who hadn't fled, been captured, or killed were furiously and impotently trying to put the flames out.

"Close the gates!" Bokis turned his nun'bak around and raced back behind the wall as they whined shut.

He looked around at the frightened, exhausted soldiers under his command and then saw a crowd of citizens looking up expectantly at him for guidance and protection.

His heart sank.

More fleeing citizens gathered near the wall to shout progressively angrier questions at him as the massive metal gate closed. Their questions turned to enraged screaming and name-calling.

“Cowards!”

“They’re still out there!”

They wailed out the names of their loved ones and smashed angry fists against the wall until there were wet, red circles splotched against the porous stone.

Bokis could see the smoke from the marina and the farmland rising from the other side of the gate but then noticed there wasn’t any smoke coming from the east docks. Bokis snapped to attention with renewed purpose and presence of mind. He ordered a group of soldiers to line the ramparts. He gathered together the soldiers under his command and began explaining his desperate plan.

“I need you all to make sure the Imperium are concentrating their attention on this gate. Give us cover while we try to gather as many as we can,” Bokis began and then turned to the next group of soldiers. “Once we’re through, close the gate behind us and fortify it with everything you can pull in front of it.”

In a loud, booming voice he addressed the hysterical crowd of citizens.

“We’ll be opening the gates briefly. Make a run for the east docks,” Bokis bellowed.

The citizens responded with anxious, uncertain chatter.

Before they had time to protest, the gates yawned open slowly. The first group of soldiers began directing the citizens through and led them along the outer wall towards the east docks.

“All right, everyone else with me!” Bokis shouted. “For Grix! For the Azai!”

The soldiers shouted along with him and charged through the gate that was already closing around them. Their intention was to round up any farmers, dock workers, and citizens who were still alive and escort them to the east docks but it was dishearteningly evident that most beyond the gate had already been lost. They’d been cut down by Imperium soldiers or were futilely fighting the flames of their burning fields and were unlikely to abandon their doomed efforts.

“To the east docks!” Bokis shouted.

Soldiers atop the first gate wall were firing flaming arrows at the invading Imperium army to lure them away. The Imperium soldiers aborted their pursuit of Bokis’ retreat and instead hid from the flaming arrows behind the few structures on farmland that hadn’t already been reduced to smouldering rubble.

As they galloped toward the docks, Bokis saw they’d only managed to save two ur’ka farmhands, a young badly burnt child, and an elderly Pod’ka who was painfully bouncing on the back of a nun’bak; gripping

its rider awkwardly with his weak, tired arms.

As they arrived, Bokis saw the vacant spaces along the wooden docks and realized they'd only have three of the expected five vessels to load with frightened Y'nari. He was morbidly grateful they hadn't been able to save more Azai than they had. As it was, they were going to have difficulty getting the survivors into the boats without them capsizing.

"We need to properly distribute weight among the boats," Bokis said. "Every large person should be paired with someone smaller and we'll slowly fill the boats that way."

Loading the Y'nari was taking longer than it should have. The soldiers and citizens alike were stumbling around in a confused, agitated daze. Neither giving or taking instruction effectively. Another explosion shook the ground behind them. They all turned to see the smoking remains of the first gate and their hysteria grew. Now, they were frantically clamouring onto the boats that yawned and pitched back and forth in response. Two citizens at the bow of one of the boats were thrown over the edge. They slapped the water with wild, flailing limbs and crazed, terrified eyes. Bokis ordered the soldiers to retrieve the two citizens before clanging his gauntlets together and shouting for everyone's attention.

"I know we're all scared," Bokis started. "I'm scared too. None of us have experienced anything like

this. If we are to survive this, we need to remain calm and orderly.”

“Calm and orderly?!” One of the citizens shouted sardonically.

“We’ll have time to lose ourselves when we’re all safe,” Bokis replied. “If we can’t keep calm and orderly, we can’t keep the boats afloat. If we can’t keep the boats afloat we won’t escape.”

No one argued with him.

They were able to load everyone onto the three remaining boats but the gunnels on the first two were dangerously close to the waterline. Any extra weight (or one bad wave) would cause water to rush in and sink them.

Bokis ordered all the soldiers to remove as much of their heavy, metal armour as they could and throw it into the sea to lighten their load. It helped slightly but not as much as Bokis had hoped it would.

Imperium soldiers, having destroyed the first gate, began to notice their group of fleeing Azai and were charging over to them with raised spears and swords.

One of the Azai soldiers jumped out of the boat and began pushing it away from the dock. Other soldiers saw him and followed suit. They were, however, too far from the boats once they were free of the dock to re-board them. They were cut down mercilessly without their armour and weapons as the Imperium soldiers swarmed the docks.

Archers set up on the docks and began aiming volleys for the fleeing boats. Arrows began striking the hulls of the ship and Bokis shouted for the occupants to row harder. One arrow struck a Pod'ka farmer in the neck piercing clean through and cutting the cheek of the citizen next to him. He gurgled and choked in shocked surprise, clutching his throat. Without thinking one of the Azai soldiers shoved the injured farmer off the boat and into the dark water.

"Row!" Bokis shouted.

An ur'ka screamed and reached out for the wounded farmer who was splashing and thrashing around; scratching at the hull.

"Help him!" She cried rocking the boat from side to side as she swung her arms out for him.

"Stop!" The soldier grunted angrily. "You'll sink us!"

The soldier tossed the hysterical ur'ka into the water along with the floundering farmer.

Bokis stood up and struck the soldier across the face before throwing him into the water with the ur'ka and the farmer.

"ROW!" Bokis shouted at the remaining Y'nari in the boat.

The most heavily weighted of the three boats was taking on water. Fast. The bow sunk beneath the waves and the occupants wailed and screamed as they thrashed about.

“We have to go back for them,” a pained voice shrieked.

“We can’t,” Bokis said mournfully. “If we get near them they’ll pull us down. They’ll sink us.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do,” Bokis said. “We do!”

Everyone had stopped rowing to watch the Y’nari from the submerged boat struggling to stay above the water.

Another arrow struck the hull.

“ROW!”

Their muscles ached and burned but the frantic occupants rowed until long after they were out of range of the archers. Bokis finally gave the order for them to stop rowing.

In the chaos, one of the Y’nari had bled out from an arrow that had lodged in his chest and was lying, still, against the bow. The survivors were sobbing and exhaustedly panting.

A soldier whispered to Bokis whether they should throw the dead Y’nari overboard but he subtly shook his head. There was now space within the boat and were no longer in danger of being overweight.

One ur’ka had an arrow sticking out of her hip and a soldier who’d been rowing with his back to the shore had one lodged deep between his shoulder blades. Bokis looked over at the other remaining boat who were throwing their dead into the water despite the

wailing protests of some of those on board.

“Where do we go now?”

Bokis sighed.

He hadn’t thought that far ahead.

He heard screaming from above them and a lone ur’ka came flailing down from the Azai Grand Library overhead. Her body aggressively slapped the water and then disappeared beneath the waves. After a few moments, her body rose to the surface; still and limp.

Bokis instantly recognized her. He rose from his seat in the boat and called to her but she remained unmoving; bobbing along with the motion of the waves.

He dove into the water and swam toward her. He gripped an arm around her waist and swam her back to the boat.

“We can go back for *her*?” An Y’nari shouted contentiously. “You hypocrite!”

Bokis ignored him and labouredly lifted Kerosi to a soldier who helped pull her aboard.

“What are your orders?”

“I know a port on the southern shore of Aq’Adez⁶,” he panted.

⁶There are four realms in Asmita. **Tul** (TEWL) takes up the majority of the central plains between mountain ranges. **Aq’Adez** (ock-AH-dez) is on the eastern edge of Asmita and runs from Ovin up to the base of *the Labyrinth* where the lands become the realm of **Ur’Bos** (er-BO-ss). What had once been the ancient lands of **Kent** before *the Green Wave* cataclysm are now called **The Blighted Lands**, which span the border Asmita shares with Vol.

CHAPTER 5

“TELA!” KEROSI COUGHED AND SPUTTERED to life just as they were arriving at the port city of Ek’tomok in southern coast of Aq’Adez.

“Kerosi,” Bokis rose from his seat in the boat to come closer to her. “You’re okay.”

The contentious Y’nari behind them scoffed.

“Bokis?” Kerosi stammered, surprised. “Where are we? Where’s Tela? Where’s my father?”

Bokis shushed her and tried to be reassuring without revealing that everyone still on the island was probably dead or on their way to slave markets.

A much larger ship was coming out to meet them and a tense quiet fell on the exhausted occupants of the two remaining boats.

“Where are you from? What business do you have in Ek’tomok?” A voice echoed down to them from the stern of the military vessel above them.

“I am Bokis of the Azai,” he called up to the voice. “Our island was attacked by the Imperium. We’re just trying to reach the mainland.”

The crew of the Ek’tomok ship was silent above them for a moment before a rope ladder was eventually dropped down to them. Bokis and the other soldiers helped the injured up onto the ship first and then the rest of the Azai refugees boarded behind them.

Bokis asked to meet with the ship’s Captain and was led deeper into the ship. Kerosi looked around at the sorrowful few who’d survived the invasion. Many were staring out into the middle distance with vacant, haunted eyes. Others were sobbing wildly or muttering to themselves.

“Would you like something to eat?” A sailor passed Kerosi some bread and a metal cup with water.

Kerosi couldn’t tell how long they’d been on that small boat but her body told her it must have been awhile from the way she devoured the bread and gulped the water down. Before the soldier left, she gripped his arm and asked whether there had been any other boats to arrive from the island.

He shook his head before offering food to the Y’nari beside her.

“They can’t,” an Azai was muttering to themselves

a few Y'nari down from her. "We're neutral. We've always been neutral. Why would they . . . It has to be some kind of mistake. This can't be real. How is this real?"

Kerosi couldn't understand it either. After Grix and the Crimson Insurrection, the Azai held a position outside the political machinations of the four realms: Tul, Aq'Adez, Kent, and Ur'Bos. The Azai were merchants, scholars, and seafarers. It was understood that they were equally aligned with all four realms of the mainland. The Azai were sought after as master shipbuilders and were often embedded into the crews of Aq'Adezean vessels as specialists and guides. It wasn't unusual for trade between the realms to be brokered through an Azai merchant specifically because of their neutrality. None of it made sense to her but then she remembered the appearance of the seemingly mythical Grokix and that strange artifact he'd been inquiring about: the erosikai. Her tired mind was beginning to ache and throb angrily.

Bokis returned from speaking with the Aq'Adezean Captain and looked slightly more at ease. That was comforting.

"They'll ferry us to the mainland and I will arrange an audience with the prefect of Ek'tomok," Bokis told the weary refugees.

Bokis turned away but Kerosi reached out to clasp his hand.

“Thank you,” she said hoarsely. “Thank you for saving me.”

Bokis smiled weakly.

She didn’t notice the Y’nari behind her, staring angrily at the back of her head.

They’d disembarked in the harbour and were told to wait at the docks until better accommodations could be made for them. While they waited, the young badly burned child had died; whimpering and shaking. No one knew his name.

Eventually, they’d set up a temporary encampment outside the city walls of Ek’tomok. They’d pulled some of the cots from the city barracks underneath makeshift tents made of linen and driftwood poles. There were no sides to the tents and so the coastal wind blew sharply across them as they attempted to sleep. They were given no blankets or pillows. Nor were there enough cots for every Azai. Kerosi chose to sleep on a thin pile of linen on the ground and offered her own cot to the ur’ka who’d just had the arrow removed from her hip. The arrow hadn’t gone all the way through and the medics who’d looked over the refugees had had to force the arrowhead the rest of the way through. Afterward, they were able to snap the arrowhead off and pull the narrow shaft of the arrow back through the wound, which caused far less tissue damage than if they’d just tried to wrench the embedded arrowhead out by force.

Bokis disappeared into the city for two ossa.

Ek'tomok medics periodically came to check on them and some mainlanders would come by twice an ossa to give the refugees food and water. Her clothes were dirty and rigid with sea salt as they'd dried. She wondered when she would get her clothes laundered. Seeing how many others were injured, laundry would not be high up on their list of priorities. The scraping of her gritty clothes against her skin made her shudder.

Infection was beginning to set into the arrow wound in the ur'ka's hip. The medics came by more often to change the bandages but Kerosi noticed the worried glances they shot one another each time they removed the gauze to check on it.

She died during the Qi'Ar. When they moved her body, the medic offered Kerosi to reclaim her cot in the dead ur'ka's place. She declined and instead offered it to another.

When Bokis finally returned, he looked discouraged.

"Is everything okay?" Kerosi asked as he passed but he didn't answer her.

She watched silently as Bokis pulled the few remaining Azai soldiers aside and whispered to them. She saw the expressions on the soldiers' faces and knew more bad news was coming.

CHAPTER 6

A DARK PROCESSION OF TULEAN IMPERIUM soldiers waited in the long hall outside the newly occupied throne room. Azai captives carried decorative, polished metal trays displaying the severed heads of fallen Azai officers and officials. The soldiers were anxiously awaiting *the head inspection*.

Whenever a battle concluded, victorious soldiers collected the heads of their enemies. The heads were washed, their hair styled, and otherwise made presentable for the Imperium Ba'Tar who'd presided over the battle. In this case, it was Ba'Tar Og'Adi.

Og'Adi had made a name for himself during *the Battle of Entis Gate* that birthed this new Tulean Imperium. His besting of Tul Republic forces and the

extreme prejudice with which he exterminated their ranks had earned him the prestigious title: *Pod'Os En Iak'Ix Tul Nokis*.

First Son of the New Imperium of Tul.

As *First Son*, Og'Adi was given an entire division to command in the latter incursions into Aq'Adez where the realm met Tul. His ensuing victories saw his rank ascent to Ba'Tar; a rank that he shared with only four other Tuleans. The only higher authority in Tul was the new Tulean Emperor himself. Of the five Ba'Tar, Og'Adi was the Emperor's personal choice to command the invasion of the Azai.

At first, Ba'Tar Og'Adi was soured toward the idea of an invasion of the Azai. He'd felt it was disgraceful that his powerful, well-trained Army would debase themselves by slaughtering such an ill-equipped, ill-prepared (and politically neutral) enemy. The ease with which they planned to take the island was so laughable that he worried his ancestors would think him dishonourable. Og'Adi had met with the Emperor and the other Ba'Tar to coordinate the rest of the plans for the larger campaign where he came to understand the strategic importance of occupying the Kingdom of the Azai. Qisaq's multi-walled fortifications would become an impenetrable base of operations for the Imperium in the southern theatre of their military campaign.

The Aq'Adezeans were not equipped for naval battles as most of their ships were built by the Azai in

the various shipyards within the archipelago that made up the Kingdom of the Azai.

Most Aq'Adezean ships had already been destroyed in *the First War of Tulean Expansion*. After the peace treaty, the Aq'Adezeans were forced to demilitarize. They were left with only trade vessels and the odd aging warships that were already generations past battle-worthiness at the time of the First War of Tulean Expansion.

Ba'Tar Og'Adi motioned for his First Advisor, Lykoss, to open the throne room doors and begin the head inspection.

A massive parade of captured Azai citizens were chained together and forced to hold the trays carrying the dismembered heads of the fallen. As they entered the throne room, Lykoss began unspooling a scroll with the names and ranks of the severed heads, the names of the soldiers who'd vanquished them, and the circumstances under which the fallen had died.

"Most honourable Ba'Tar," Lykoss began. "We begin this inspection with the King of the Azai. He was not killed by any Tulean and died a selfish, dishonourable death by his own hand; cowering in his royal chambers. His is a shame that will live on for eternity."

Lykoss motioned for the frightened Azai to place the tray carrying the King's head at the feet of the throne before waving them off and calling the next Y'nari to present their macabre tray to Ba'Tar Og'Adi.

Tela's hands were shaking. The head on her tray jostled slightly from side to side as she neared the throne. She didn't remember the name of the official whose head she was carrying but she did recognize seeing his face before.

"This is Destai Parr, he commanded the royal guard and was bested in battle by Okis Se'Terris."

As Lykoss said the soldier's name, the whole hall erupted in an enthusiastic cheer that roared darkly about the high ceilings of the throne room.

"-who heroically charged the barricaded royal chambers."

Lykoss waved Tela forward and she placed the head of Destai Parr beside that of the King beneath Ba'Tar Og'Adi's feet. The procession of death continued until the whole of the steps in front of the throne were filled with trays of severed heads and then continued to spread out from the steps into the greater throne room.

The more heads were presented, the more chance she had of recognizing to whom they once belonged. The experience was making Tela feel dizzy and nauseated. She wanted to flee. She wanted to scream. But instead, she stared forward quietly with quivering lips and unfocused eyes.

The fact that the heads were washed, their hair styled, and in some cases, make-up applied made the gory display feel even more sinister somehow. If Tela had been thinking about it more deeply, she would have

noticed that none of the heads were scarred or damaged in any way. It was not honourable for opponents to have facial wounds.

In the Imperium, it was considered weak and desperate to scar an opponent's face. A warrior was seen as unskilled if they could not beat an opponent with swordsmanship alone and had to resort to causing damage to their opponent's head. As well, if one allowed their own face to be scarred, they too were seen as being an unskilled warrior. Some heads of fallen opponents were obfuscated or destroyed entirely to spare the soldier the shame of being exposed as unskilled at the head inspection. However, the higher ranking the combatant, the more it was expected that the combatant's head would be presented at the head inspection.

Tela was finding it hard to breathe. She had shut her eyes completely and was trying to imagine herself anywhere else.

Every time an Imperium soldier's name was mentioned the others would shout and clang their shields and swords against each other in celebration. The grotesque ritual seemed to go on forever.

There was a Grokix who appeared carrying the holy book, called an Oglissa, who read passages that praised the victorious soldiers and condemned the wretched souls of their fallen enemies.

As the Grokix folded back into the crowd of soldiers,

Lykoss approached the throne and motioned for them to escort the Azai prisoners back to where they were being held in the barracks.

“Most honourable Ba’Tar,” Lykoss began.

Ba’Tar Og’Adi nodded for him to continue.

“The final remnants of the Azai’s forces have fortified themselves in a cave system built into the mountains in the northwest of the island. We don’t know their exact numbers and they’ve collapsed the entrances to these caves. Our scouts have discovered that there are openings on the mountainside where Azai forces can look out and perform reconnaissance. As of yet, we have not found a way to scale the cliffs to reach these openings,” Lykoss explained.

“So they can watch us,” Ba’Tar Og’Adi said slyly. “They will be able to see the beach, yes?”

Lykoss nodded. “Yes, Your Honour. They can see the whole marina.”

“Excellent,” Ba’Tar Og’Adi smiled. “Take a third of the captive Azai to the marina and bury them to their necks in the sand. Let the creatures on the beach have them. What’s left will be claimed by the rising of the tide.”

“But great Ba’Tar, should we not prepare them instead for sale? They are worth a considerable sum on the slave market,” Lykoss said.

“That’s why I told you to only gather a third,” Ba’Tar Og’Adi said coldly.

Lykoss nodded and bowed. He was about to leave but turned back to the throne after a moment of hesitation.

“One more item, most honourable Ba’Tar,” Lykoss said meekly.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Sir, soldiers discovered the charred remains of another Grokix,”

“What?!” Ba’Tar Og’Adi slammed a fist down on the armrest of the throne so forcefully that it rattled the trays of severed heads lining the steps.

“The Grokix, it seems, was murdered in the same manner as the others,” Lykoss said. “Burnt out from the inside.”

“The assassin followed us to the island?” Ba’Tar Og’Adi said quietly to no one.

“We’ve also heard word that, because of the continued assassinations, a Vo’dis of the Sen’Daris Er’Ebos is being dispatched from Tul to investigate.”

Ba’Tar Og’Adi gritted his teeth.

“Those archaic fanatics?” He hissed. “I’d have thought our new Imperium had grown beyond that nonsense. Such asinine mysticism should remain relegated to our superstitious, uneducated past.”

“Indeed,” Lykoss said. “We are to expect the Vo’dis from western Tul to lead the investigation. I haven’t personally met him but I know him from his reputation to be less fanatical than the majority of his order.”

Ba’Tar Og’Adi nodded. “See that his arrival and

investigation are not disruptive to our operations here. *That* should be our true focus here, not a few dead sorcerers. You may leave.”

Lykoss bowed again and left Ba'Tar Og'Adi alone in the throne room among the of severed heads on trays.

CHAPTER 7

THEY STOPPED BRINGING FOOD OUT to the Azai refugees individually and made them all line up, single file, instead. Kerosi noticed there was less and less food offered with each meal. A gruff Y'nari a few Os younger than she was pushed into line in front of her.

“Excuse me?” Kerosi started to protest but the Y'nari shot her a glare that silenced her.

The others in the line didn't seem to mind the rude Y'nari cutting in front of them as they were all looking down at the sand around their feet or staring off listlessly with tired, unfocused eyes.

Kerosi saw Bokis and stepped out of line to follow him.

She called after him but it took repeating his name a few times before he stopped walking and turned to her.

“Sorry Kerosi,” he smiled weakly. “I’m-uh-“

“No need to apologize,” she said. “I just wanted to thank you again for pulling me from the water. When I fell, I thought that was the end.”

He just nodded.

“Have you heard of any other Azai who escaped the island?”

Bokis hesitated a moment before he replied: “It’s still early, Kerosi. We haven’t heard from any other settlements along the coast but we should remain hopeful.”

“Nothing about my father?” Kerosi inquired. “Or Tela?”

He shook his head.

“When are they going to move us within the city walls?” Kerosi asked.

Bokis gently took her arm and motioned for her to follow him to the edge of the refugee camp away from the ears of the others who were preoccupied with their paltry rations.

“Things have changed here,” Bokis began. “This isn’t the same city I remember. There’s been an extended drought and unrest among the citizens. The prefect I knew was recently deposed and exiled. The city has become an independent centre apart from Aq’Adez. The

new leadership seems reasonable but I'm told Ek'tomok is dealing with their own problems and they expect us all to leave shortly."

"Leave?" Kerosi said and Bokis shushed her. "Where would we go? The nearest settlement is at least half an ossas walk from here and most of us are not in any condition for that kind of journey."

"We know," Bokis said.

"Many would die on the journey," Kerosi whispered.

"We know," he sighed. "The new leadership said they had enough problems with Aq'Adezean loyalists, Sansarc fanatics, and something they called *sand demons*, without also having to worry about Azai refugees."

"Sand demons?" Kerosi said, surprised.

Bokis shrugged.

Kerosi was silent for a moment as she furrowed her brow and contemplated solutions.

"Grix successfully fled the Tuleans," Kerosi said feigning an encouraging tone. "So too will we."

"Yes we will, my friend," Bokis smiled.

"Could the leadership spare a cart and a nun'bak or two for our injured?"

"We're currently working on a plan," Bokis nodded. "I'm on my way to speak with their leadership now."

"Well, don't let me keep you," Kerosi said. "I just wanted to thank you again, Bokis. We will find Tela."

"I know we will," Bokis touched her shoulder

comfortingly. “We’ll see her again. Your father too.”

“*Sand demons?*” She repeated.

Bokis shrugged.

CHAPTER 8

LYKOSS RECEIVED DELAYED NEWS from the marina that the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos vessel had docked only moments before the Vo'dis and their entourage arrived at the gates themselves. He hurriedly shooed the redundant messenger away in sharp, angry gestures and clomped down the flame-scorched steps to meet the Vo'dis and the rest of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos delegation.

The Vo'dis lead the convoy atop an ornamentally armoured nun'bak. The Vo'dis dismounted and stepped toward Lykoss in long, graceful strides. Lykoss' head merely came up to the sharp, metal clavicles of the Vo'dis' armour.

"Welcome to the occupied island, your worship," Lykoss bowed. "Had we known you'd arrived we would

have sent-“

The Vo'dis rose a gauntlet to silence him.

As Lykoss lifted his head, he saw the silent eyes of the Vo'dis' helmet staring at him. Lykoss wondered how the Vo'dis saw through the helmet. He couldn't make out any eye slits. It was just one solid piece of moulded metal almost like a sculpture or bust in the grim image of some snarling demon.

He swallowed hard.

“We wish to speak with the Ba'Tar,” a diminutive Grokix behind the Vo'dis said.

Lykoss puffed his chest out anxiously as he smoothed imaginary creases from his robes. The flagrant breach of protocol was making him exceedingly uncomfortable.

“Ba'Tar Og'Adi is currently indisposed with-“

The Vo'dis raised their gauntlet again silently.

“This is not a request,” the Grokix said.

“Of course,” Lykoss hid his disdain poorly as he bowed again.

He gestured for the delegation to follow him up the steps and into the occupied castle.

Ba'Tar Og'Adi was standing at the large wooden table with a massive map of the southern mainland of Aq'Adez spread out across it. He was speaking with some officers and regarding the placement of forces for upcoming engagements. The entrance of the Vo'dis and the rest of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos delegation was met

with a frustrated sigh from the Ba'Tar.

"I've killed many Y'nari for lesser interruptions," Ba'Tar Og'Adi said to them as he noticed their presence in the throne room.

The Vo'dis silently stared at him from behind the horrific helmet.

After a long moment of tense silence, Ba'Tar Og'Adi waved away the officials around the table leaving only the throne room guards, Lykoss, the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos delegation and himself.

"What assistance does the illustrious Sen'Daris Er'Ebos require from the Ba'Tar of their Imperium allies that could not have been received from an official at the marina?" Ba'Tar Og'Adi sat down on the throne.

He rose his head defiantly over his protocol-skirting, *religious fanatic*, intruders.

The diminutive Grokix stepped forward.

"The Sen'Da-

"Quiet!" Ba'Tar Og'Adi shouted. "Can the *grand* Vo'dis not address me himself? I refuse to speak to a lowly Grokix. It's bad enough that your order has demanded they be embedded within our forces. I'll not debase myself by addressing your proxy when you stand right here before me."

The Vo'dis stared forward, silently.

"You disrespect me," Ba'Tar Og'Adi said with narrowed eyes. "I'll not be disrespected in my own court."

“I mean no disrespect,” the Vo’dis spoke from behind their helmet.

Lykoss began to laugh at the muffled sound of the Vo’dis’ voice.

Ba’Tar Og’Adi smirked.

“Now I see why you have a lowly Grokix speak for you,” Ba’Tar Og’Adi laughed. “Yours is the soft, airy melody of a gentle ur’ka. How do your soldiers obey the orders spoken with such a fair and ethereal timbre?”

Lykoss was clutching his belly, laughing heartily.

The Vo’dis removed her helmet and stared fiercely into Ba’Tar Og’Adi’s eyes, unblinking.

“An ur’ka?!” Ba’Tar Og’Adi huffed disbelievingly. “Are the aging Sen’Daris Er’Ebos so near irrelevancy that they need to artificially inflate their numbers by allowing ur’ka among their ranks? What an absolute disgrace. I should kill you all right now just for-“

The Vo’dis raised her staff. The tip glowed an angry green. A sphere of energy extended out from the glow to encompass Lykoss who was instantly frozen in place. The Vo’dis took a few steps toward the throne and Ba’Tar Og’Adi rose only moments before the sphere of energy enveloped him as well.

Og’Adi found himself immobile and rigid.

“I am Vo’dis Ka’Cyr of the Sen’Daris Er’Ebos of western Tul,” she said. “I am here by order of the High Council to investigate the continued assassinations of *lowly* Grokix embedded within your ranks. I do not

need your permission to conduct my investigation and my gender will not be an impediment to my task despite what you and your obnoxious court of troglodytes believe.”

The royal guards lining the throne-room walls stood silently at attention sharing confused glances.

Vo'dis Ka'Cyr's staff began sparking and sizzling in her hand sending arcs of electricity flashing about within the energy sphere.

She put the grotesque helmet back over her head. Her freed hand began to glow as well and Lykoss was lifted off the ground; still and tense. She used her power to draw Lykoss closer to her. She let him hang helplessly in the air before her.

“As I understand, our *aging, irrelevant* order and our Grokix are largely responsible for the ease with which you were able to take the marina,” Vo'dis Ka'Cyr said, snarkily. “Are there any of your ranks who can summon the fireballs that breached the island's gates? You sit so proudly on your usurped throne, yet slight the very allies who achieved your victory for you.”

Lykoss began screaming behind his motionless countenance. His skin began glowing and dots like burning embers appeared over his face and arms. The dots grew until his whole body was flickering red and orange. His body began to smoke until his whole form caught fire. She released him from his immobility and he came crashing down against the throne room

marble; thrashing and screaming as he burned.

She left the smouldering, twitching body of Lykoss behind her as she stepped closer to Ba'Tar Og'Adi who was floating in the air motionlessly above the throne.

"The Sen'Daris Er'Ebos have allied ourselves with the Imperium because our *goals* align, Og'Adi," she sneered at him. "Don't assume to be my equal, let alone my better."

She reached up and grabbed his stolen crown off his head and threw it to the ground. Her gauntlet ended in long, dark metal claws which she dragged forcefully across Ba'Tar Og'Adi's face drawing rivers of blood that rushed down his neck and into his armour and robes beneath.

"I simply came to inform you that we have already completed our investigation," she said. "We've also determined that the erosikai is no longer here. The Imperium has allowed it to pass through their impotent fingers. When I return to the High Council with my report, I will note the multiple ways under the command of the grand Ba'Tar Og'Adi in which the Imperium has failed our alliance."

Vo'dis Ka'Cyr turned her back to Og'Adi and walked slowly and gracefully from the throne room with her Sen'Daris Er'Ebos entourage. As if on their own, the large doors slammed closed behind them. A few moments later, the energy sphere collapsed sending Ba'Tar Og'Adi crashing hard against the marble floor.

He blinked painfully through the blood raging down his face. He touched his tattered face with a quivering hand. The bright, sharp sting from the salt on the skin of his fingers shot through him and he feared he may pass out. The wet rush of the red liquid through his fingers slapped the marble noisily as it fell against the dark tiles of the throne room.

When he realized he finally had the use of his voice again, he screamed out in hysterical fury: "Kill them!"

He rose to his feet and covered his mutilated face from the gaze of the flustered and confused soldiers who fumbled towards the throne room doors.

They pulled hard on the handles but the doors would not move.

Ba'Tar Og'Adi knocked the soldiers aside and yanked on the door himself only to find it would not move for him either.

He let out another rage-filled scream before turning on his guards. He mercilessly cut each one down until he was alone, panting angrily in the vacuum of the silence.

He ripped apart his cloak and wrapped it around his head. His deep facial wounds began to darken the bright yellow fabric with its wet gore.

CHAPTER 9

ONCE A UNIFIED REPUBLIC THAT SPANNED all of Asmita, the singular Y'nari civilization was suddenly and violently fractured in *the Green Wave* cataclysm. Afterward, where the realm of Tul devolved into a xenophobic military dictatorship, Aq'Adez attempted to maintain the core ideals of the former Asmitan Republic.

Kerosi had copied an early constitution of Aq'Adez as well as many contemporary accounts of what life was like in Aq'Adez. Removed from the other four realms by sea, the Azai became a monarchy. As such, they classified their historical periods as *early kingdom* and *middle kingdom*.

In Aq'Adez, they called those same periods *the*

Olix and *the Emyo* periods respectively. Aq'Adez had been divided into nearly 300 prefectures during the *Olix* period. Each holding considerably more local power than in the latter *Emyo* period when Aq'Adez became a unitary state. In the *Emyo* period, the central government of Aq'Adez delegated many functions to the prefectures but retained the overall right to control them.

Until Bokis told her otherwise, Kerosi had understood Ek'tomok to be the political centre of the Hiko prefecture. Hiko was directly across the Koris sea from the Azai Kingdom and so was their primary trading partner.

Kerosi was curious if any of her reproductions were for sale at Ek'tomok's central market. She had attempted to enter the city to visit the marketplace but guards at the city gate denied her entry. They'd said something about 'having orders to keep all the Azai refugees outside the walls until city leadership had a plan in place to *accommodate them*'.

She didn't like the way that sounded.

She returned to find others who were feeling uneasy about their confinement to the refugee camp outside the city walls as well. She tried to find Bokis to express her concerns.

No meal was offered for dinner and the refugees were anxiously bustling around the camp chattering and worrying with one another. The city gates were

closing for the night and she saw Bokis charging briskly toward the camp as they swung shut.

“They’ve betrayed us,” Bokis whispered to Kerosi as he pulled her close to him.

“What?”

“Do you see the dust on the horizon?” Bokis subtly gestured to the red dunes in the west.

She squinted in the dimming light of Mōt⁷ as it set.

“They plan to sell us all to the Imperium,” Bokis said through gritted teeth. “We need to leave.”

“And go where?” Kerosi asked. “Like I said before, the nearest settlement is—”

“I know,” Bokis said. “I know, Kerosi. We need to leave. We cannot save everyone.”

“But we need to try—” Kerosi began but Bokis immediately interrupted her.

“You said it yourself, most of us are not in any shape to make this journey,” Bokis said. “Do you think a rational and measured discussion is possible when we’re talking about attempting to sort out who’s going on and who will be left behind to become slaves or be killed? It will be frantic, hysterical chaos. We need to

⁷ There are three main celestial objects in the sky above Te’a. The first is **Ka** (KAW) - immovable, incapable of change. Ka is responsible for the intense, focused heat in Ovin and the habitable dusk of Asmita. Ka’s complete absense in Vol makes the region bitterly cold and relentlessly dark. The second of the three celestial objects is **Arkus** (ARR-koo). Arkus seems to flit about the sky with no discernable pattern. It is seen as a morally ambiguous trickster. Finally, **Mōt** (MOTE) is the largest of the three and follows a predictable, dependable path in the sky. Mōt allows for the passage of days and the changing of the seasons in Te’a.

leave *now*.”

“Where are you going?”

The contentious Y’nari was standing behind them and staring angrily at them both.

“Where are you going?” He repeated intentionally loudly to garner an audience.

Bokis didn’t respond and instead took Kerosi by the arm and began to lead her away. The contentious Y’nari gripped Kerosi’s other arm and pulled hard. She tripped and fell forward landing on her palms; scraping her skin against the rough, dry ground.

“Enough,” Bokis turned and stared the boy down. “You don’t want me as an enemy.”

“You have no power here,” the boy scoffed. “None of us have any power here.”

The boy turned to address the growing audience who were now gathering around them.

“I heard them!” The boy yelled. “The Aq’Adezeans plan to sell us to the Imperium.”

The crowd gasped and murmured anxiously amongst each other.

“It’s true,” Kerosi said as she rose to her feet. “They’ve refused us entry to the city. They’ve stopped feeding us. We must leave this place before the Imperium arrives.”

“And go where?” The boy raised his arms in an exaggerated gesture of exasperation. “Where are we to go?”

Bokis looked at Kerosi and the boy noticed.

“They were going to leave us!” He cried. “They plan to desert us. Cast us away as they cast away my parents in the boats. They didn’t protect us on the island. Why would they protect us here?”

“That’s not true,” Bokis began.

“It is! My father was wounded but instead of helping him, you threw him overboard. When my mother protested you threw her overboard too.”

“No!” Bokis interjected. “Your father was injured yes. And a frightened, misguided soldier did throw your parents into the water but I was the one who threw him out of the boat after them. If we could’ve gone back-”

“Ah, but you *did* go back for this ur’ka!” The boy hissed. “You found the time and the space in our boat to rescue this ur’ka from the inner city. But when it comes to Azai from beyond the first and second gates? Where was that same enthusiasm for our safety and protection?”

“Silence!” Bokis shouted.

Other soldiers had now joined the crowd and Bokis motioned for them to remove the boy. As they did the crowd protested vocally and then one of the soldiers was hit in the face with a rock and collapsed to the sand.

The cacophony of angry voices surged into a frenzied din of hysterical noise that alerted the city guards that paced the walls. They shouted down at the

refugees from above to calm themselves and disperse from the city walls. Instead, some of the Azai began throwing rocks up at them.

A guard blew a horn and then multiple others echoed back along the top of the city walls. An arrow struck the hard ground and embedded itself beside one of the Y'nari throwing stones. It was meant to be a warning but instead galvanized their rage and more refugees began picking up rocks and throwing them up at the guards.

The contentious boy gripped a stone but, instead of throwing it up at the guards, launched it straight at Kerosi's head. Bokis leapt between them and the rock bounced harmlessly off his chest-plate.

More arrows were whistling down upon them from the city walls.

Bokis rushed toward the boy and gripped him by the neck raising him clear off the ground. The boy slapped at Bokis' arms as he choked and wheezed.

"Bokis," Kerosi cried. "Stop. We need to leave. Let's just leave."

Bokis began lowering the boy down but then an arrow whistled through the boy's neck. He gurgled and coughed in shock before falling backward out of Bokis' grasp. He writhed around on the hard, dirt ground before laying still; a look of terror frozen on his face.

"We need to leave!" Kerosi pulled on Bokis' arm just as an arrow thrust itself beneath the unprotected

skin between pieces of armour.

Bokis stumbled slightly but forced himself onward to escort Kerosi along the city wall despite his injury.

“I’m sorry, Bokis,” Kerosi sobbed. “You were right. We should’ve just left.”

The further they fled from Ek’tomok, the more the dirt and dunes became dense jungle.

“Only a little further,” Kerosi huffed. “We can hide within the trees and ferns and check your wound.”

Kerosi saw the colour had drained from his face, his pace was slowing, and he was relying more and more on Kerosi to keep himself upright.

CHAPTER 10

THE SEN'DARIS ER'EBOS VESSEL had left the occupied Azai marina without incident. So far, Ba'Tar Og'Adi had not sent anyone to pursue them. Vo'dis Ka'Cyr had stood at the stern of the ship watching the island grow smaller and smaller behind them until they entered open waters. Her hand was throbbing wildly. When she finally looked down at it, her entire palm was badly burned, blistered, and discoloured. She went below decks to her quarters where her ancient staff was leaning against the cabin wall. It too was throbbing with a bruised energy.

She cursed under her breath.

Her heartbeat was still racing through the adrenaline making it hard for her to slow her breathing.

There was a knock at her cabin door.

“Your grace,” the diminutive Grokix, Destim, called from the other side of the door.

“Enter,” Ka’Cyr replied.

Destim closed the door behind him before he asked: “Are you alright?”

“That was impulsive, wasn’t it?” She sighed.

“An interesting course of action, for sure,” Destim smiled, trying to relieve Ka’Cyr’s visible tension with sarcasm. “But probably very satisfying.”

“Yes it was,” she looked at the claw-tipped gauntlets caked with Ba’Tar Og’Adi’s blood. “But will the Order understand? Will the Imperium?”

“True, I think you’ve indeed made an enemy in Ba’Tar Og’Adi. If that will spill over into the Order’s relationship with the Imperium? That remains to be seen,” Destim said.

Destim saw her injured hand and took it in his. He said a few words of healing over them. Ka’Cyr’s hand began to glow underneath his. She could feel the pain dissolving away, her skin tightening, and the raised blisters shrinking.

“There,” Destim said as the glow retreated and he gave her hand back to her.

He looked over to where Ka’Cyr’s staff was intermittently popping and sparking.

“That, however, is something I do not have to ability to repair,” Destim admitted.

“How do I explain this to the Order?” She picked the staff up in her newly restored hand. “*Would you mind repairing this ancient, irreplaceable staff that I damaged while letting my pettiness get the better of me during a diplomatically sensitive situation’?*”

“I wouldn’t word it exactly like that,” Destim smiled.

“Vo’dis Yaolin would not have allowed himself to react so impetuously,” Ka’Cyr placed the staff back against the cabin wall.

“He most certainly would have,” Destim exclaimed. “Do you forget how he met his end? The very recent end which saw your promotion to Vo’dis in his stead?”

“We were both there, Destim,” Ka’Cyr said. “No one knew there was a nest beneath the dunes.”

“Ah, but why was Yaolin there and not in the highlands, circumventing the valley as were our orders?” Destim asked. “Yaolin allowed himself to be goaded into a ground assault prematurely by the Aq’Adezeans when his orders were to meet up with you and the other squad commanders on the northern ridge.”

“But he could see the undefended flank of-“

“Was it undefended or did the Aq’Adezeans have prior knowledge of the nest?” Destim raised an eyebrow. “Instead of following his orders, Yaolin was thinking about the glory he might receive from a swift victory for the Order but . . .”

“The nest,” Ka’Cyr nodded.

“The nest,” Destim said. “His own impetuous desire for glory and recognition distracted him from the consequences of his haste. As for *your* consequences, I feel like your response only slightly exceeded what the situation demanded after being so disrespected. And between you and me, I doubt Ba’Tar Og’Adi can hold the same views regarding ur’ka any longer; not with a permanent reminder of what they are capable of.”

“You always know what to say, Destim,” Ka’Cyr smiled. “Were we able to find out enough about the Grokix and the erosikai before I set fire to our diplomacy with the Ba’Tar.”

“Two Grokix had been assassinated before the Imperium left the mainland and one had been killed on the island,” Destim began. “The two on the mainland left no witnesses but there was a soldier who was merely injured when Grokix Aros was assassinated on the island. Their description of the assassin was not overly helpful.”

“And the erosikai?”

“It had been on the island but had been removed before the Imperium invasion,” Destim said. “Traces of its power have left a trail that we are currently following to the mainland.”

“Someone knew the invasion was coming?” Ka’Cyr asked. “Or was its relocation unrelated?”

Destim shrugged.

“It will be a while until we reach land, your grace,” Destim placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Take this time to rest and I’ll try and figure out whether there is a way to repair your staff.”

“Thank you, Destim,” she smiled.

CHAPTER 11

KEROSI COULD HEAR THE VIOLENCE in the distance. The Imperium had arrived at the city walls in the time she and Bokis had taken to reach the edge of the jungle. Neither the Ek'tomok city guards nor the Imperium had noticed the pair's escape. Kerosi helped Bokis move deep enough into the trees to where she could no longer see or hear the chaos behind them.

Finally, she set Bokis down against the large exposed roots of a Bo'Ikthus tree. He winced painfully as he settled.

"I'm sorry," Bokis wheezed.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," Kerosi tried to soothe him.

He shook his head.

“No. I do. When we were children-” Bokis started but had to catch his breath. “I could have . . . I should have told Tela . . .”

“You should’ve told her what?” Kerosi stroked his sweaty forehead gently. His skin was greying and his eyes were focusing and unfocusing slowly.

“Did . . . did she know?” He breathed out one long, steady sigh until he became still.

“Bokis?” She whispered sadly but knowingly.

She ran gentle fingers down his face to close his eyes.

“She knew, Bokis,” Kerosi held his still body to her. “Tela knew. She loved you too.”

At that moment, the petty customs and prejudices of Azai life on the island seemed especially trivial and asinine. A hideous wave of grief crashed over her as she held her friend. Not just a grief for his passing but for a love that the traditions of the Azai had denied Tela and Bokis.

Tela had met Bokis as young Azai often do during the autumn joining festival. The festival was a classless celebration connecting all Azai wherever in the strict social order they originated. The masked festival veiled the social striation that was usually rigid and unalterable. The walls of each district were meant to contain like and separate unlike. The farmers and dock workers were set apart from the merchants and artisans who were themselves set apart from the aristocracy

and royal families.

One night a year, the divisions were erased and all were allowed behind the inner city walls to take part in the autumn joining festival. Outside of such events, the Azai were confined to their class and those connections made during the festivals were expected to be immediately dissolved.

Tela and Bokis could not.

When their families discovered their love, Tela was sent to become a scribe in the Grand Library while Bokis was enrolled in training to become a member of the city guard. Tela had confided in Kerosi that the pair had planned to escape the island together but that Bokis had rejected her at the last moment. Bokis' end-of-life confession led Kerosi to believe his rejection had been more pragmatic than sincere. Tela had had a more privileged life than she would have on the mainland if she and Bokis had left together when they were young. Something must've happened in the space of time between when they'd planned to run away together and his rejection of Tela but now Kerosi would never know what that event was.

Kerosi continued to sit beside Bokis silently. She breathed in and out sombrely and listened to the noise of the creatures in the trees and the rustling of the wind through their leaves. Her chest was tight. Her knotted-up throat choked back most of the air that choppily escaped her lungs with each shaky exhale

before denying air back in with each inhale. She let out a single, long, hysterical scream that crescendoed in a harsh, raspy hiss. As it ended, her scream echoed angrily beneath the canopy of trees overhead.

She dropped her head into her hands and began sobbing wildly.

She hugged Bokis' still form and accidentally pushed him over. The sound of his head bouncing off the trunk before settling in the ferns next to the tree made her stomach queasy. She tried to turn him over again but the weight of his breastplate kept him firmly in place despite having shed the majority of his armour back at the docks when they made their escape. Kerosi worried about trying to bury Bokis and then the awareness of everything that would be involved in making that happen made her anxiety spike harshly and she threw up.

She sat beside him in a daze and time passed and stood still at the same time. It was getting dark and cooler. Not cold. There was a chill she couldn't feel the way she knew she should've been able to. Her body was shivering but her mind was disconnectedly spiralling. Every possible action she could take was bombarding her with a shared importance though she couldn't muster the agency to act on any of them.

Exhausted, she collapsed next to Bokis and cuddled close to him. She closed her eyes tightly shut and continued to cry until she crumbled into an uneasy

sleep. Her dreams were no respite. They reminded her of moments in her youth she'd forgotten. Moments in her future that could never come to pass. Moments she would have to endure in the coming urix and Os now that her course had been irreversibly altered.

She woke up screaming next to Bokis who'd remained face-down in the dirt throughout the Qi'Ar. She resumed sobbing and began digging with her hands in the soil to carve out a grave for Bokis. She stopped shortly afterward when she realized how much energy she'd already exerted and how much digging she'd still have ahead of her to make a hole deep enough for Bokis to fit into. She also realized she'd have to make it deep enough that his grave would not attract creatures from the jungle who would dig Bokis right back up again.

She rubbed her tired, sore eyes with the back of one of her hands. The dirt and tears made a long dark smear across her face that only further irritated her moist, red eyes.

"I'll come back for you," Kerosi whispered before standing upright unsteadily.

She took in a few choppy breaths before venturing further into the jungle. She wanted to believe that she would indeed be back for her fallen friend but something inside her was telling her she would not. She refused to look back.

I will see him again when I return.

She was keenly aware that she was probably lying

to herself but she wanted to push that idea deep down and hide it away. She shuffled through the jungle in a daze, unable to determine the distance she'd travelled or for how long.

The heterogeneous chaos of the overgrown foliage was abruptly severed revealing a perfectly manicured clearing within the jungle. The same grasses and ferns of the environment behind her had been manually cut low to the ground before her. All the saplings had been removed leaving tight, neat groupings of fruit-bearing trees in organized groves. Smaller berry bushes looked like they were frequently and meticulously pruned. There was a dome above her of tall aged trees whose canopy shielded them from Mōt's light while the majority of the jungle beneath it had been cleared.

She heard a sudden snort. Kerosi shot her gaze down from the canopy above to locate the source of the sound. A large animal, a ti'vetok, stood majestically before her. She'd copied illustrations of the creature herself when she had been assigned an Aklis bestiary early on in her career. Looking at the ti'vetok now, the illustrations did not do justice to the size and majesty of the beast. Its long, broad horns rose above its massive triangular head supported by its thick, muscular neck. Two sets of arms jutted out from its chest. Of which, the bottom two arms held the front of the ti'vetok's body tall with a regal elegance the Aklis bestiary had failed to capture. The strong hind legs were rested in a seated position.

The ti'vetok seemed to ignore Kerosi's presence entirely and instead used its upper pair of arms to pull berries off the manicured bushes beside it.

She realized she'd stopped breathing and took in a few short, fast breaths. Kerosi slowly stepped nearer to the ti'vetok but it did not flee or react to her movement at all.

An arrow pierced through the ti'vetok's chest and it collapsed instantly with a long, single sigh. Hunters appeared shouting in celebration and congratulating a singular hunter who was holding a large bow. The victorious hunter walked calmly toward the felled ti'vetok while the others slapped his shoulders and back as they neared. A sombre procession of Pod'ka in robes followed behind the hunters and gathered around the ti'vetok. It took Kerosi a few moments to realize they were speaking one of the "unspoken" languages that she'd had to learn as a scribe.

The shamans began to perform a rite of gratitude for the animal that had been killed. The group prayed around the ti'vetok to thank it for its sacrifice. The hunters conversed with each other about how grateful they were that the arrow had pierced the beast cleanly through and that the ti'vetok had died instantly; without pain. It was only then that one of the shaman noticed Kerosi's presence.

They started barking a worried exchange between themselves unaware that Kerosi could speak and

understand their language until she spoke to them.

“I need help.”

CHAPTER 12

SA'TOMI HUFFED EXHAUSTEDLY OVER THE RIDGE only to find more scorched land smouldering in front of him. He slumped to the ground trying to catch his breath. He worriedly looked behind him but he could not see any Imperium or Sen'Daris Er'Ebos soldiers he knew must be tracking him.

He'd tried to flee the battlefield the instant the creatures skittered out of their nest but had become pinned beneath the body of a soldier who'd fallen to the swarm of claws and pincers. Sa'tomi had heard the sickening chittering of the creature's mucousy mandibles as they tore at the flesh of the soldier flailing impotently on top of him as they were devoured. The battle had eventually moved on around him.

Sa'tomi only began breathing again when he was sure that the futile advance of the Imperium towards the besieged Aq'Adezean city was far enough down the field that his movement would be concealed amongst the dead. He pushed the mutilated body of the soldier aside and sprinted to the edge of the battlefield. He pressed himself up against the protection of the cliff face that rose high above him. Most of the Imperium and Sen'Daris Er'Ebos forces had remained on the mountain path above the city; awaiting their orders. The small contingent of soldiers to which Sa'tomi had belonged had instead been ordered to split off and assault the Aq'Adezean city from a wide, flat plain the Vo'dis in charge had believed was *unguarded*.

Racing down the path and out across the battlefield, he'd been buzzing with a dark, frenzied enthusiasm that had since bled from his mind. The feeling had held on through the ambush of the monstrous creatures skittering out from their nest and through the majority of his escape into Aq'Adez but the agonizing clarity of his situation was once again returning to him.

Sa'tomi reached into his pocket to find the last two morsels of what the soldiers colloquially called *Imperium chew*. He began to feel the charge of courageousness and invulnerability once he swallowed the pressed nugget of herbs, sap, and ground roots. Somewhere in the chemically assisted fury of his dissociative mind, a nagging reminder popped into existence alerting him

to the lone Imperium chew he still possessed and the horrific withdrawal that would be racing down upon him once his supply ran out.

Many of the retreating Aq'Adezeans had burned their own fields and villages ahead of the Imperium's advance leaving little to aid the invaders as they spilled into the contested region.

As he trudged across the black, smoking fields, Sa'tomi could feel the energy of the Imperium chew pushing away his exhaustion. He felt separate from the strain of his physical form and was instead floating above within the memories and thoughts of a life before. The life where he'd been the son of nobility in Tul before the Civil War. His family had remained loyal to the now-deposed King. They'd been forcibly relocated after General Thrakis won the Tulean Civil War.

During his original relocation, Sa'tomi had escaped his military escort but was quickly recaptured at one of the multitudes of Imperium checkpoints once they saw the raised, raw brand on the skin of his shoulder. He had successfully avoided relocation but instead wound up on the front lines of the Tulean Invasion of Aq'Adez.

For the next while, Sa'tomi kept phasing in and out of foggy memories and real-world events. Neither seemed truly real or unreal. They felt as if they were happening somewhere in a distant, memory-like place somehow superimposed within both the past and the

present at once.

Sa'tomi could still hear the chittering of the creatures swarming out from their camouflaged nests beneath the cracks and burrows of the battlefield. He swatted and thrashed at invisible creatures as he ran.

He happened upon a destroyed village and furiously picked through the rubble for food or water or any usable supplies amongst the dead. He couldn't tell how far up the Crimson Coast he'd made it before the Imperium chew began to wear off again but it was far enough that the soil was not burned and was instead supporting thick, red grasses and mosses.

Sa'tomi could see a settlement in the distance. It was then that the effects of the chew sharply fell off and the fatigue and aching muscles assaulted his senses in unison.

He collapsed to his knees.

He felt the dryness in his throat and the sting as he breathed across the tight, split skin of his lips. He was panting and shaking and finally crumpled completely against the red grass.

When he awoke, a large group of Tulean soldiers had already arrived at the village gates. He recognized some of the officers who led the Tuleans. At first, he was sure that they were there to seek him out for desertion; that they would return him to the Imperium or kill him outright. Instead, the soldiers were only there to intimidate the villagers into being relocated to make

space for the occupying Tuleans who planned to turn the village into an outpost.

From his hiding space a distance away from the village, Sa'tomi could faintly hear an authoritative Tulean shouting: "Those who refuse will be added to the collection!"

Behind the Tulean were a procession of carriages each holding a massive chest full of severed heads. Sa'tomi was well acquainted with the Imperium's horrifically effective scare tactics. He'd seen them firsthand on their bloody campaign into Aq'Adezean territory. They would parade out some unfortunate villager from the last settlement they'd forcibly relocated and would promptly cut off the villager's head in a gory spectacle to emphasize the seriousness of the Imperium's demands.

As the village surrendered without incident, the Imperium soldiers grabbed another villager at random to be used as the example for the next settlement they would encounter as they pressed further east into Aq'Adez.

CHAPTER 13

THEY WERE SILENTLY SHOCKED to hear this strange ur'ka speaking their language. One of the shamans stepped forward and asked Kerosi to repeat herself.

“I need help,” Kerosi’s frayed voice wheezed. “My friend and I-”

She pointed behind her in the direction she came but quickly realized that she didn’t know how far behind her Bokis’ body lay. She fell to her knees and began sobbing again.

The Pod’ka exchanged cautious glances, unsure of how to proceed. The hunter who’d felled the ti’vetok came up beside her and wrapped an arm around her. Some of the shamans seemed to protest but most of the

Pod'ka were more curious than they were concerned. One of the shamans, however, broke away from the group and began running off deeper into the manicured clearing.

"I am Tet," the hunter said gently. "You have entered the lands of the Ix'Arki of the Et'Uvitan tribes. How may we provide help for you?"

Her emotions raged outward and she tried to explain herself through a stuttering, shaky voice. She repeatedly had to start sentences over again. Either because her sobbing was interfering with comprehension or she'd forgotten the specific word she was looking for in the ancient language she'd been told was no longer spoken.

Eventually, she'd related to Tet how Bokis had been left behind and she wished to retrieve his body for burial but she no longer remembered where his body lay. Tet motioned for a few of the hunters to follow him and sent the rest back to their village. The shamans vehemently protested the strange courtesy Tet was offering this curious ur'ka outworlder. He calmly but sternly repeated his orders for the others and they turned and began walking in the direction of their village.

Tet and the hunters who remained used their skills to track Kerosi's movement back to where she'd left Bokis. One of the hunters saw the armour Bokis was wearing and immediately became suspicious of Kerosi and frowned at her.

He said a phrase that sounded like *peace enforcer*. Kerosi considered that she must have misinterpreted the hunter's words because those two words together were ludicrous.

Tet talked the other hunter down and asked Kerosi if they could remove his armour to bury him or if she wanted Bokis to be buried with it.

Kerosi thought about it a moment and realized that his amour was a heavy reminder of the life that was placed upon him, not the life Bokis would've chosen.

"It would be better that he be buried without his armour," Kerosi said.

Tet nodded and silently began dismantling the various layers of metal armour and placing them to the side of Bokis. The Ix'Arki hunters gently lowered Bokis into the grave.

"I am unfamiliar with the burial customs of outworlders," Tet admitted. "How do we proceed?"

"We would recall memories we shared with the friend we lost," Kerosi said softly as she stared into the grave at Bokis.

"What memories do you have with the Pod'ka?" Tet asked.

She breathed in, shakily. As she attempted to respond, her throat tightened again and she began sobbing. She instinctively reached out for Tet and hugged him and he let her.

"I'm sorry," she said once she could speak again.

Tet hugged her back wordlessly.

Kerosi rubbed the tears from her eyes and tried to start her story again. She stumbled over some of the words in the language of the Ix'Arki but the hunters seemed to be able to follow her story.

Shortly after the autumn joining festival where Tela and Bokis met, the three of them had stolen away to a small secluded lagoon on one of the smaller Azai islands. Then, they'd been young enough that their absence went unnoticed as they did not yet have jobs and responsibilities. She remembered how intense the turquoise colour of the lagoon had been. She remembered the way the luminous red of the sand shone up through the shallow water that separated the lagoon and the sea as if it were glowing. That was the last time the friends had spent time together as a trio.

After she'd finished her story, the Ix'Arki helped her gently cover Bokis with soil.

It was getting near Qi'Ar so Tet and the others lit a fire a ways off from Bokis' grave while others set up camp.

"We'll travel back to our tribe at O'sa," Tet explained.

"Why are you helping me?" Kerosi asked.

Tet seemed confused by her question.

"You were obviously in need," Tet said.

"I sense some of the others believe you shouldn't be helping an outworlder," Kerosi said. "Regardless of

my need.”

“The others are only being cautious,” Tet said. “I worry sometimes if not to a fault.”

“Why aren’t you cautious?”

“I’ve been told its because I’m young and stupid,” Tet smiled.

“I too am young and stupid,” Kerosi laughed, weakly. “Maybe I should’ve been more cautious . . .”

After she trailed off, they sat in silence by the fire.

“How is it that an outworlder knows our tongue?” Tet asked.

“I know many,” Kerosi said. “I copy manuscripts from all over Te’a written in various languages.”

Tet looked confused again. “What is *manuscripts*? I have never heard this word before.”

“Manuscripts are a collection of words in symbols that can be written down and preserved to be read by others,” Kerosi said. “It’s a way of saving stories and ideas outside of one’s memory.”

“So you are a shaman, outworlder?” Tet asked.

“In some ways, yes. I guess I am,” Kerosi said.

“Those who were initially cautious may become more welcoming if they were to know you are a shaman,” Tet said. “We are told the outworlders are ignorant, violent, and worthy of our distrust. In my short time with you, I find you to be none of those things.”

Tet could see Kerosi struggling to keep her eyes open and suggested that they settle themselves for

sleep.

In the O'sa, Kerosi was noticing the colours of the ferns and grasses around the camp. She could smell the thick, floral mist of the jungle air in her nostrils like it was the first time she'd ever had such a sense. There was a calm within her that filled her with a weightlessness. She saw the other Ix'Arki taking down their camp as they got ready for the ossa and she felt safe.

"Did you sleep well?" Tet asked, crouching down beside her.

"I did," she yawned.

The sounds of the choirs of creatures in the trees above them was oddly soothing. She hadn't truly been aware of the beauty and magnificence of the jungle before that moment. Then she saw the mound of dirt beneath the Bo'Ikthus tree and remembered the fear and uncertainty that had not left her but was merely dormant; hiding in plain sight.

"In our tribe," Tet began, "we believe those who pass on and are committed to the soil will rejoin Te'a in another form. Just as important as the form that came before, only different. Bokis has become a part of Te'a again and will continue on in a new form."

"Thank you, Tet," Kerosi smiled. "That's a beautiful thought."

She said a silent goodbye to Bokis before they left his grave to return to Ix'Arki tribal lands. The walk back gave her time to take in the jungle with all of

her senses. The pink, orange, and burgundy leaves swayed hypnotically back and forth above them in the subtle breeze. The sweet, moist air kissed her face as it caressed gently past them. It wasn't long before they reached the division where the overgrown jungle once again became the meticulously landscaped territory of the Ix'Arki.

Another group was waiting for them as they arrived. They addressed Tet but talked past Kerosi whom they ignored. Tet chastised them for their rudeness and asked that they be more inclusive and welcoming of Kerosi who he introduced as a shaman of the outworld.

A few of the Ix'Arki shaman were shocked to hear her title and viewed her with conspicuous suspicion. Others seemed more intrigued and curious by the shaman of the outworld. One of the latter stepped forward to welcome her and motioned for her to follow as they moved deeper into Ix'Arki territory.

Some of the Ix'Arki were not aware that Kerosi could speak their language. While they walked, they began gossiping openly about her. Tet smirked but didn't stop them from speaking. The Ix'Arki discussed how some believed Kerosi's intrusion upon the ti'vetok ceremony the ossa before would bring the corruption of the outworlders to Ix'Arki lands. Alternatively, others expressed their belief that she might be a good omen; a bridge between the Ix'Arki and the outworlders.

"What do you think, Kerosi?" Tet asked her. "Are

you a *corruption* or are you a *bridge*?”

“I can only be myself,” Kerosi said in their language.

The Ix’Arki who’d been speaking about her tensed and lowered their heads slightly in embarrassment.

Tet smirked at her and Kerosi couldn’t help but smile.

The sparse grouping of huts on the way into the settlement became steadily more condensed until most of the structures shared walls. Movement was corralled into alleys between structures or corridors between rows of fruit bearing trees. The huts on the outskirts of the settlement seemed to hold entire families while these ones closer to the centre of the settlement appeared to be single occupant dwellings.

It reminded her of life on the island. The closer to the farms and the marina someone lived, the larger their home tended to be. Farmers shared their homes with their entire family and sometimes extended family. As such, there had to be enough space for a kitchen, a pantry, a living room, a place to clean oneself and their clothes, and places for everyone to sleep. Outside, they needed a stable, a shed for tools, and a covered shelter to store firewood and animal feed.

The inner residences, where Kerosi had lived, were called *Be’narri*. Each *Be’narri* had anywhere between 40 to 60 apartments. Each apartment required only a place to sleep, a place to store and display belongings, a place to entertain a guest or two, and a small balcony

that looked out over the Azai island. She loved her balcony where she would read and drink tea.

She missed her balcony.

Inner city dwellings did not have to worry about kitchens or baths as every apartment complex was built next to an *Estakarr*. Each had its own restaurants and markets. They had public baths and laundry services and other amenities the community could share.

One ossa out of every senix, a resident of the *Estakarr* was required to assist in the daily operations of one of the various free services that were offered. Residents could choose which area of daily operations they would assist.

As children, Kerosi and Tela had taken an extensive food safety training course which allowed them to choose food preparation as their *Estakarr* duty. Sometimes the pair worked laundry duty together but food preparation was preferred. They never had to work sanitation duty though which they both actively avoided. Those who did work sanitation, however, were greatly appreciated by the others in the *Estakarr* and were given unique benefits. Much like food safety, sanitation duty required extensive training to ensure there were no outbreaks of disease or illness within the *Estakarr*.

As Kerosi followed Tet further into the settlement, she could smell the savoury scent of the meals being prepared inside the structures on either side of the

alley. The architecture of the Ix'Arki settlement had an organic design that seamlessly married the structures to the jungle. There was something so aesthetically cohesive about the way the settlement was planned out.

As they approached the largest and most ornate of the structures in the Ix'Arki settlement, they saw a crowd had formed in front of it.

Most of the Ix'Arki seemed optimistically curious about this strange outworlder, wearing unusual clothing, and who somehow spoke their language. They did not stare but instead stole cautious glances in short bursts.

"Are you here to hurt us?" A small ur'ka child looked up expectantly at Kerosi.

Their parent quickly pulled the child close to them and profusely apologized for their daughter's rudeness.

Kerosi stopped walking and knelt down to the child's level. She calmly reached out a hand for the child to take, which she hesitantly did after looking up at her parent for permission that was given with a subtle nod.

"No, I am not," Kerosi said as she gently held the ur'ka's hand. "I came here looking for help and Tet and the others were kind enough to offer it to me. I would never return help with hurt to anyone."

The little ur'ka lit up at Kerosi's response.

"What is your name?" Kerosi asked.

"I am E'os," she smiled brightly when she realized Kerosi was friendly.

“It’s very nice to meet you E’os,” Kerosi smiled back. “My name is Kerosi.”

The child’s parent nodded silently to Kerosi before escorting E’os away in the opposite direction. Tet continued to lead Kerosi toward the large structure at the centre of the settlement.

“This is the Okmut,” Tet explained. “Where our leaders gather and our shamans pray.”

“What is the occasion?” Kerosi asked. “Why are all these people outside the Okmut?”

“Your arrival coincides with the Ix’Arki convergence,” Tet said.

“Convergence?”

“Once every season the leaders of each of the Ix’Arki tribes meet here at the Okmut to discuss the state of our communities and the Ix’Arki as a whole. This crowd is waiting to hear the results of this season’s convergence.”

There was a commotion a ways in front of them obscured by the bodies of those gathered outside the Okmut. Abruptly, the crowd parted to reveal a group of Ix’Arki wearing ceremonial robes aggressively advancing toward them.

CHAPTER 14

WORD HAD COME SWIFTLY THAT THE SON of his former master, Og'Epit, was in urgent need of council. So urgently that Joroq was spirited away from his home in southeastern Tul by military escort and ferried straight to the island of the Azai without an opportunity to pack any belongings. He was assured that he could send for his things once he'd arrived on the island.

He'd been told that Og'Adi had asked for him personally. It had been so many Os since Joroq had last seen the son of his former master that he could not even guess at what would prompt such a request. The soldiers who'd escorted him from his home to the island were not forthcoming with details about Joroq's sudden new

appointment. He did, however, hear rumours that the former council, Lykoss, had disappeared mysteriously after a particularly contentious visit by a Vo'dis of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos. The whispers also spoke of how Og'Adi, now a Ba'Tar of the Imperium, had been isolating himself in the former throne room of the usurped King of the Azai. Joroq was requested to visit the Ba'Tar the moment he arrived on the island as Og'Adi would see to no one else. The vessel had left port at the southernmost tip of Tul and sailed without stopping until they reached the ruins of the Azai marina.

On the journey, Joroq had time in his cabin to ruminate on what reason Og'Adi could possibly have to behave so erratically out of character. He'd known the young Pod'ka to be measured and level-headed; traditional almost to a fault. His time under his former master, Og'Epit, had taught Joroq to disregard most of the whispers that flitted about but it often happened that there was a breath of truth floating within.

The throne room had been locked since the Vo'dis departed the island. The attendant Joroq spoke with said Ba'Tar Og'Adi had given his troops a single elaborate show from a balcony high above the castle courtyard as to why he'd been isolating himself. He'd shouted out a mostly incomprehensible rant about enlightenment while wearing a cloth around his head. He'd claimed in a meandering and disjointed speech that the visit from the Vo'dis of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos had been a catalyst

for a spiritual awakening within him that caused him to rethink leaving his head uncovered.

“*Uncovered?* Has he been eating?” Joroq asked one of his escorts as they rode up the stone path toward the castle.

“Food has indeed been left outside the throne room doors but he will not open them to retrieve the food until all the attendants have left. The food is not there when we return so we can only assume he is eating what we leave him.”

Joroq was led into the castle where the rest of his military escort broke off and a single attendant brought him the rest of the way up the opulent stairwell and down a long ornate corridor to the throne room. The single attendant knocked twice on the door.

“Your worship,” the attendant spoke through the throne room doors. “The honourable council, Joroq of Eq’Elabotix, has arrived as per your request.”

“Faithful Joroq, you may enter once your escort is gone,” Ba’Tar Og’Adi whispered from the other side of the thick wooden doors.

The attendant bowed to Joroq and then departed down the corridor. Disappearing down the stairwell.

Joroq knocked on the door.

“I am alone, Master Og’Adi,” Joroq said after he could no longer hear the footsteps of the attendant.

The door creaked open slightly allowing Joroq to squeeze through before Ba’Tar Og’Adi brought his whole

weight against the door, slamming it shut.

The smell attacked Joroq's senses. The stink of death and rotting food swarmed up to besiege his nostrils. The throne room was littered with bodies that were bloated and puffing out from their restrictive armour like macabre dough in bread pans. Massive rivers of dried blood snaked across the throne room, pooling into a central lake in the middle where the scattered severed appendages of long-dead soldiers and the remains of Ba'Tar Og'Adi's food had been discarded.

"Master Og'Adi, are you alright?"

Joroq turned to face his former charge to see Og'Adi was wearing soiled clothes with torn, bloody fabric wrapped around his head. His wild eyes were wide and frenzied.

"Thank you, Joroq of Eq'Elabotix, for your presence," Og'Adi's calm voice belied the intensity in his eyes.

"Adi," Joroq said as he reached out to touch Og'Adi's shoulder.

The Ba'Tar flinched.

"Formalities are unnecessary with me," Joroq said gently. "What has happened here?"

Og'Adi swiftly pulled Joroq into a tight, almost painful, hug and would not let go. Joroq could feel the Ba'Tar sobbing but did not bring attention to it.

"How is your wife, Joroq? How did she find the voyage?" Og'Adi asked after abruptly pulling away from him and rubbing his wet eyes with a soiled sleeve.

“She was not with me when I was summoned,” Joroq said. “She is visiting family in northeastern Tul and is not expected back for another urix. But you didn’t ask me here to inquire about my wife. Why *have* you asked me here?”

“You served my father honourably until his death,” Og’Adis began. “You raised me until I left to serve Tul before the Imperium. There is no one else I would trust more than I trust you.”

“You honour me in speaking so,” Joroq bowed.

“I have been dishonoured in a way I do not know how to face,” Og’Adi said finally.

“What dishonour, Adi?”

Og’Adi sucked in a chestful of air before unsteadily exhaling. He slowly unwound the blood-soaked cloth from around his head to reveal the long, deep wounds raked across his face. The raised edges of the tattered skin had begun curling back from the troughs of puss and plasma. They were giving off the putrid stench of infection.

Joroq instinctively gasped

“Adi,” Joroq touched his shoulder. “Who did this to you?”

Og’Adi clenched his fists tightly.

CHAPTER 15

THE AGGRESSIVE SHAMANS SPOKE ONLY TO TET and ushered them through the crowd of Ix'Arki outside the Okmut. They reached its large doors made of woven branches whose gaps were filled in with what looked to be a mixture of clay, pebbles, and leaves. Ix'Arki architecture had an aesthetic closer in style to Azai structures than to any Aq'Adezean architecture she'd seen. The Ix'Arki designs incorporated organic materials from the jungle available to them. Granted, Kerosi had not seen into Ek'tomok but the city walls and the buildings that had been erected around the exterior of the city had shown Aq'Adezean architecture to be simple, blocky, and primarily functional in their designs. Ix'Arki design had curves and an organic flow

that blended the structures into their surroundings instead of contrasting against them.

Kerosi was lost in the environment until they abruptly stopped in front of another large set of doors. Guards on either side of the doors waited for a horn to sound before pulling them open wide. Inside was a long central chamber with a ceiling of leaves and interwoven branches that rose high above them. At the end of the chamber were three chairs made from the roots of three massive trees that spanned the entire back wall of the immense chamber. The roots had been bent and moulded over what must have been many Os to create the shape of these organic chairs.

The middle chair was slightly higher and larger than the other two and the Ix'Arki who sat upon it wore a large crown made of thin, braided Bo'Ikthus branches and their fat, pink leaves. To the left of the Ix'Arki leader was an elderly ur'ka wearing a bright, airy dress. To the right was the shaman who she remembered had quickly left after her initial encounter with the Ix'Arki.

He was staring at her with suspicion and contempt.

The chamber was lined on either side with groups of Ix'Arki wearing slightly different outfits. She assumed their differences in dress were a designation of their respective tribes of origin. They all murmured amongst themselves as Kerosi entered.

The leader rose from his chair and raised a hand to silence the room.

“Tetokua Sa’Estok, mighty provider and protector of the Et’Uvitan tribes, we acknowledge your presence here before the convergence,” the leader said in a low, booming voice.

“Es Aq’ik,” the elderly ur’ka said.

Every voice in the chamber repeated: “Es Aq’ik!”
Welcome.

The leader then motioned for everyone to sit.

Kerosi wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do so she watched Tet who stood alertly with both hands behind his back. She mirrored him, awkwardly.

“Strange occurrences have plagued our lands as of late,” the leader began once everyone was seated. “The blight in the North. The drought in the West. The peace enforcers in the East.”

Peace enforcers? Kerosi still wasn’t sure she was translating that phrase correctly.

“And now, an outworlder in our court,” the shaman next to the leader spoke.

“My name is Kerosi,” she said defiantly and the whole room gasped.

Kerosi tightened and then added more meekly: “I didn’t come here to disrupt. I apologize if I have. I simply came here looking for help. Help that Tet-“

“SILENCE!” The leader’s explosive voice echoed about the chambers violently.

Two guards came up behind her and wrapped a cloth bag over her head. One of the guards pushed her

down to her knees, hard.

“If the outworlder continues to be disruptive, it will be expelled from these chambers,” the shaman said.

Kerosi was silent.

The leader spoke again in his commanding timbre: “Tetokua Sa’Estok, it has been determined by this convergence that your actions have disturbed the harmony of our tribes.”

Tet didn’t speak and waited for the leader to continue.

“Due to your station and influence within the tribe, it is our recommendation that no action be taken against you for the spirit in which you broke our rules was one of compassion and selflessness. The convergence believes, however, that the outworlder can no longer remain within our borders lest its corruption spread amongst the Ix’Arki. First Shaman, Yokwol, believes that your spirit of kindness toward the outworlder has been what has protected you from its corruption. Because of this, you are charged with returning the outworlder to the frontier *immediately*. Your actions, while admirable were the beneficiary an Ix’Arki, have been recorded in our histories and shall not be repeated by you or any other without stern punishment. You may speak in acknowledgment.”

“I acknowledge,” Tet said, bowing.

Kerosi couldn’t see through the bag but she felt the eyes of the convergence upon her.

“Ken Veko,” the leader said.

“Ken Veko,” the whole chamber repeated.

Go forth.

The guards pulled her onto her feet and marched her out of the Okmut. They didn’t remove the bag from her head until they’d reached the edge of the Ix’Arki settlement. One of the guards added an unnecessary shove before they left Kerosi and Tet.

“I apologize for your treatment,” Tet said after a few uncomfortable moments of silence. “Fear and uncertainty have made the Ix’Arki distrustful.”

Kerosi didn’t say anything. She started walking ahead of Tet into the thick foliage of the jungle. Tet led from behind, guiding Kerosi in the direction of the frontier silently.

“You could’ve stood up for me,” Kerosi finally said after they’d been walking most of the ossa.

“An Ix’Arki cannot address the convergence without permission,” Tet said. “I would have if-“

“You *could* have,” she said and then refused to speak again.

CHAPTER 16

IT SEEMED TO RA'QURO LIKE A PETTY REASON to assassinate someone but she had been contracted to kill for less. An ancient relic from the Olix period had been stolen from an estate of a wealthy and influential Aq'Adezean on the eastern edge of the realm. The *jost*, a ceremonial weapon used to focus the mystical energies of wu'jik, had been passed down from generation to generation within the client's line until its theft only a few senix prior. Ra'Quro had tracked the relic to an estate owned by a rival aristocrat a few prefectures over who was well known to her client. Her contract was to slip into the Pod'ka's estate, retrieve the *jost*, and assassinate her client's rival.

Security was minimal and concentrated mainly at

the front gates allowing Ra'Quro to discretely repel down to the roof of the guest house from the cliffs above. The opulent and regal estate was built against the cliff face which made for a spectacular and grandiose aesthetic but offered pitifully inadequate protection against someone repelling down to the roof of the guest house from the cliffs above.

Ra'Quro entered the enormous east wing of the estate without incident. It was being used to display all the Pod'ka's treasures with the jost resting on a central pedestal clearly oriented as the focal point of his vast and opulent collection. She removed her jacket and strapped the jost securely to her torso with multiple strands of leather before buttoning her jacket back up again. She stretched left to right and back to front to make sure she still had a full range of motion with the relic strapped to her. She noticed that if she moved too far to her left the jost would dig into her ribs. She kept that knowledge close in her mind as she made her way to her target's bedroom.

It was over swiftly. The sleeping Pod'ka made only the slightest, softest gurgle as Ra'Quro thrust the short blade into his neck. She pulled the token from a pocket in her jacket and dipped the client's side of the token into the dead Y'nari's blood. She marked the token with two deep slashes from her blade making an x before placing the token back in her pocket. She silently made her way back to the guest house where she crawled up

the rope, dragged herself over the cliff ledge, and pulled the rope up after her.

She leisurely made her way back into the city where the Volek Ti'Carr had a secret chapter-house disguised as a laundromat and bathhouse. Most didn't pay attention to the movement of strangers around such establishments. If you were an ur'ka, even less so. She entered the laundromat and made her way to a secret door behind a large vat of boiling laundry. Behind the door was a narrow stairwell that descended into the dirt before opening into a maze of corridors that spider-webbed beneath the city.

"Present your token and writ of contract, Shadow," a guard outside the main chambers said, holding out his hand.

Ra'Quro fished out the token from her jacket along with the writ held in a satchel that swung at her side.

"You may enter," the guard stated after inspecting both the token and the writ.

The Volek Ti'Carr or *the Shadows in the Darkness* were a network of assassins that had stalked Asmita since before the Green Wave. The clandestine organization of assassins had gained an almost mythical notoriety over its long existence. In Tul, during the Warlord period, the Volek Ti'Carr had generated more fear for the leaders of the time than entire standing armies. Many warlords had met their end at the edge of a Shadow's blade.

One did not choose to join the Shadows in the

Darkness. You had to be recruited to become a Shadow.

A voleki.

In her youth, Ra'Quro had been living in a cave just west of an Aq'Adezean city in the Serapix prefecture. Her family had been massacred by sectarian violence directed at half-bloods like herself. Being Tulean or being Aq'Adezean in Asmita came with their own unique challenges but if you were a half-blood all sides equally despised you such that Ra'Quro would only ever leave her miserable cave to scavenge food and steal supplies from the city and surrounding villages.

The location of her home was never uncovered as she was intensely cautious never to be followed back to her cave. Yet one Qi'Ar an unfortunate and unrelated raid of a local warehouse saw her arrested as an A'ji spy. She was cast into an Aq'Adezean oubliette with only the bodies of past occupants and the diseased, scurrying rodents to keep her company. Ra'Quro had been interested in what resources may have been stored within the warehouse oblivious to its use as a command centre for the A'ji insurgency against the Aq'Adezean Republic.

Ra'Quro couldn't determine just how long she'd been confined within the oubliette. When she'd almost given up any hope of rescue, she was liberated by a Shadow who delivered her to a nearby Volek Ti'Carr chapter-house where they offered her enrollment to the shadowy network as a voleki.

She hadn't killed an Y'nari before becoming a Shadow and found it unnervingly easy when she first did. She viscerally remembered every death since but rationalized them as the price of no longer having to live in a miserable cave or to die of dehydration in an oubliette.

When she entered the chambers, she stepped towards the presentation table and placed both the writ and the token beside one another. She removed her jacket and untied the leather straps holding the ceremonial jost against her torso. She added the jost to the objects on the table.

On one side of the wax token was Ra'Quro's seal that designated the contract belonged to her. The other had the client's seal. Once a contract was complete, the client's seal had an x sliced into it by the contract's Shadow before delivery to the leader of the chapter-house, called a *Prime Darkness* or Estuvi Volq.

A seal of the house of Eq'Elabotix was on the wax token laying face up against a new writ of contract. The Estuvi Volq gave Ra'Quro what information they had already compiled about her next contract. They spent the next while trying to figure out where along the coast Vo'dis Ka'Cyr's vessel was likely to make landfall.

CHAPTER 17

TET LEFT KEROSI AT THE EDGE OF THE JUNGLE. He'd stopped at the tree-line and Kerosi wordlessly pressed on past him. Continuing off into the sands. Somewhere on their journey they'd left Hiko prefecture and the jungle had become the Soyok prefecture to the northwest. In the distance, she could see the capital city. Yubikot. It was the ancient capital of all of Aq'Adez in the Olix period.

Yubikot had been built inside one of the ruined domes constructed by the A'ua'ki civilization which was already ancient at the time of the Olix period. The newer structures from later eras were built among the ruins of the dome. Finally, contemporary buildings spilled out into the land around the dome more than

doubling the size of Yubikot.

As she ventured through the outskirts of the city, Kerosi noticed the abject poverty and the diversity of those experiencing it. She saw the sprawl of tattered tents and kiosks selling various wares and foods that didn't look particularly appealing. The destitute Y'nari didn't seem to notice when Kerosi passed as they shuffled around the streets in their dusty misery.

Her Azai Grand Library robes had once been brightly coloured and regally ornamented. Now, they were torn, muddied, soiled, and missing many of the beaded embellishments that had fallen away during her journey. Her hair was matted and oily. She was worried that her horns would instantly give her away as an Azai foreigner but found a striking diversity among the poor of the outer city. She saw Qiat'Ynarr horns, Osk'Ynarr horns, and, surprisingly, even a few Tul'Ynarr horns throughout the standard Sun'Ynarr horns she'd expected in an Aq'Adezean city.

The deeper she moved into the city, the less diverse the horns became until she realized she was beginning to get strange, angry looks from the Sun'Ynarr in the street. The storefronts were no longer tents of fabric but buildings of mortar and stone, lumber and thatching. The clothes of the Sun'Ynarr around her were stylish and colourful. Their hair was cosmetically pleasing and those with facial hair had their beards trimmed, combed, and oiled.

“What are you doing here, Azai scum?” A voice snarled from behind her.

Kerosi whipped around to see a group of five Sun’Ynarr not much older than herself.

“Kozu asked you a question, you trash!” One of the Sun’Ynarr stepped forward and pushed her hard with both hands.

Kerosi stumbled backward before regaining her footing.

“You’re not allowed to be here,” another said. “You’re gonna have to be punished.”

One of the Sun’Ynarr wrung their hands together menacingly. The five were all wearing the same garb that looked like it was some kind of uniform.

“Let her be,” a low, calm voice spoke slowly from behind them.

One of the uniformed Pod’ka looked across the street to where a tall, dark-haired Sun’Ynarr stood holding an armful of books and scrolls.

“What business is it of yours, shopkeep?” The largest of the five Pod’ka stepped closer to the stranger. “You *know* who we are!”

“The product of nepotism and inbreeding?” The stranger answered flatly.

Kerosi laughed and the Pod’ka immediately became uncomfortable. It was clear that they were unfamiliar with the meaning of the stranger’s words.

“Oh yah?”

The largest of the Pod'ka clomped aggressively closer to the stranger who calmly placed his books and scrolls down on the nearest flat surface. The Pod'ka wound up to strike the stranger but the punch was easily avoided. He used the large Pod'ka's own momentum to launch him into one of the many decorative trellises lining the street. The trellis crumpled around him and scattered flowers, leaves, and loose soil about the street.

The other four Pod'ka seemed unsure of how to proceed. Reluctantly, the next Sun'Ynarr stepped in to face off against the shopkeep with raised fists.

The Sun'Ynarr swung wide twice.

"All you have to do is leave," the shopkeep said in a gentle tone.

"You're outnumbered," the largest of the Pod'ka painfully picked himself up from the ground and raced furiously back towards the stranger who effortlessly sidestepped the attack.

The large Pod'ka struck the other uniformed Sun'Ynarr behind the stranger. Landing together in a moaning, aching heap.

The final three Pod'ka wisely decided to flee.

The stranger picked up his books and scrolls in his arms and motioned over to Kerosi with his head: "You're welcome to follow me if you wish. Many areas of Yubikot can be unfriendly."

She quickly fell into step behind him.

"Thank you," Kerosi said finally after they'd walked

together in silence.

“No need for thanks,” the stranger said. “Those awful Pel Weskot thugs need to be challenged.”

“*Pel Weskot?*”

“This is your first time in Yubikot, isn’t it?”

“Is it that obvious?”

The stranger smiled.

“Part of the upper-class education here in Yubikot is for young Pod’ka to wear uniforms and walk the streets in groups enforcing racist rules and bullying those those they deem lesser than them. Namely, those born to parents who were not *elite* enough to send their sons to formal education,” the stranger said. “They call themselves Pel Weskot.”

The Law-bringers.

“And whose law is that?” Kerosi asked.

“Indeed,” the stranger rolled his eyes.

Kerosi offered to carry some of the stranger’s books but he declined.

“We’re almost at my shop anyway,” he replied.

When they turned the bend, there was a row of two-story buildings overlooking a market and a central garden area with a small decorative pond.

“This is my shop,” the stranger said and unlocked the side door.

The stranger placed the books and scrolls on the table by the side entrance which was already overflowing.

“Have you eaten?”

Kerosi shook her head.

The stranger looked her up and down and Kerosi tensed slightly but then he said: “You look about the same size as Qera. Would you like a shower and some clean clothes?”

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” she said meekly.

“No imposition at all,” he smiled. “Not all of Yubikot is as unfriendly as the Pel Weskot.”

The shopkeeper’s business, a bookstore, took up the entire first level of the building. He told her to watch her step as the door didn’t extend all the way down to the floor. There was a section of wood across the base of the door that they both had to step over to enter. He led her to a side stairwell that rose to the second level he called home. It looked wonderfully chaotic. Almost like her own apartment back on the island if she’d had an entire floor to herself instead of just her own apartment. There were stacks of books on tables and clothes hung over the furniture. There were flowers and potted plants amongst the paintings and trinkets that lined the walls and counters.

“All of this is yours?”

“*All* of this?” He laughed. “I never thought of it like that, but yes, this is all mine.”

The stranger disappeared into a room for a moment and Kerosi could hear the sounds of him rummaging through drawers and closets.

One of the books on the stranger's counter caught her eye.

It was one of hers. She turned the book over and saw her guild symbol branded into the spine of the book beneath the title: *the Crimson Insurrection of Grix*.

"You have my book," Kerosi smiled.

"Your book?" The stranger entered the living room with a towel and an armful of clothes.

She pointed at the branded symbol.

"Wait, you're Kerosi," his mouth dropped. "What are you doing in Yubikot?"

He paused and then realized he had the answer to his question already.

"You made it off the island?"

She nodded silently.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've only heard whispers of what happened there but . . . none of it has been good."

They stood in the silence together a moment before the stranger raised the towel and pointed to a room branching off from the living room.

"It's not much but the water will be warm and I have some of her-" he stopped. ". . . there are clothes for you to change into once you finish your shower."

Kerosi thanked him and gathered up the towel and clothes before disappearing into the bathroom.

The water was indeed warm. There were fragrant soaps and oils lining the shower wall. As she washed her body she noticed she still had Bokis' blood on her

arms. She scrubbed harder and the lather expanded across her skin until the water swept the pink mixture of soap and gore away. She washed her long hair and spent most of her shower detangling the matted knots that had formed within her wild, auburn mane.

After she stepped out of the shower and dried herself off with the towel, she found the clothes the stranger had given her did indeed fit. There was a mirror hanging on the wall and she saw herself for the first time in quite a while. She realized she appeared different but couldn't exactly place how.

"How did you find the clothes?" The stranger's muffled voice called from the other side of the bathroom door.

She slid the door open slowly and entered the living room. She did a little twirl in her borrowed outfit and the stranger smiled.

"They look really good on you," he said. "Qera would've . . . I'm glad they fit."

"I really appreciate your kindness," Kerosi said. "You didn't have to-"

"Say no more," he smiled. "I have food too if you're hungry. You must be hungry."

"I am," she said. "Thank you."

She tried not be rude but she was shoveling down the food at a ravenous pace. She hadn't eaten a meal since before she'd fled Ek'tomok and hadn't fully appreciated how hungry she actually was.

“How did you come to be in Yubikot?” The stranger asked.

She started to answer but her mouth was full of food. The stranger chuckled a warm, hearty laugh.

“How about *I* do the talking while you eat?” he smiled.

She nodded and kept eating.

“My name is Ob’Ake,” he said. “This is my bookstore. The last one in this district.”

“It’s very nice,” Kerosi said as she swallowed.

“Thank you,” Ob’Ake said and then his tone changed; becoming more sombre. “Things are changing. Yubikot is becoming a foreign city to me. I’ve been thinking that it’s time I move north. Qera and I plan to . . . there’s nothing keeping me here anymore.”

“Who’s Qera?” Kerosi asked.

Ob’Ake sighed. “Qera is . . . was . . . she was my wife. She passed a few urix ago from a sickness she caught on the trade route coming back from the mountains.”

“I’m sorry,” Kerosi stopped eating. She reached out to touch Ob’Ake’s hand.

“It was remarkably fast,” he said. “She was already quite sick when she returned home and then it wasn’t long after that she was dead. This city holds nothing but memories of pain for me now. I’m in the process of leaving but I’ve been in the process since she died. I’m not sure how to proceed. I’ve been stuck going through the motions of my routine but . . . you don’t want to

hear any of this. I apologize. These are my problems.”

“No, Ob’Ake,” she said. “I do wish to hear.”

“Well, maybe later. I’m making myself sad again. Instead, I could be using this opportunity to talk about books with a scribe from the Azai Grand Library!”

Their discussion meandered through many varied topics: life on the island, the daily experiences of a scribe, and then to the political climate in Yubikot.

Ob’Ake explained how public education in Yubikot was not at all about instilling knowledge within the youth but instead prepared children to carry out rigidly narrow roles: either a wife and mother if they were an ur’ka or a farmer, a soldier, or a member of the city guard if they were a Pod’ka. Only an elite few Pod’ka ever became officials and politicians and when they did, it was purely for reasons of nepotism and privilege. The frivolous and detached aristocracy was in a privileged station all their own.

Working class ur’ka were praised for their domesticity and were expected to be subservient to the Pod’ka hierarchy. Large families were rewarded and uncoupled Y’nari were taxed heavily. Ur’ka who bore many children were publicly rewarded while older, childless ur’ka were shamed as selfish or as unwanted or sent to mental asylums for not going along with the social priorities of the state.

The High Commission of Truth was established to “avoid interference of a free press” but actively

suppressed information that went against the narrative of the state. Polemic literature was released by the commission to denounce the growing social unrest that was developing among the lower classes. The operatives for the High Commission of Truth frequently raided bookstores like Ob'Ake's and forcefully removed foreign and "inappropriate" books.

Elite and wealthy literati had esoteric discussions about philosophy and ontology that were largely divorced from the realities of daily life. Pok Yewq or *Truthful Conversations* were a decadent and classist pastime that only the most wealthy and insular could take part in. These conversations only happened in lavish courtyards or palatial estates of the aristocracy who often forgot that the servants were also listening to their rhetoric. The servants disseminated the often insulting and disparaging ideas about the poor, which only increased their disdain for the rich and further fanned the flames of rebellion. The Imperium's invasion of the Azai island and the western frontier of Aq'Adez weren't helping matters. The aristocracy, however, seemed unbothered.

At one point, Ob'Ake went down to the shop below and brought back his collection of manuscripts which Kerosi herself had copied. They discussed her experience making them and her thoughts on their contents. Late into the evening, Ob'Ake produced a pre-Ar'Kon Calendar Oglisa. They talked about their theories on

pre-history and what they each knew about the A'ua'ki and the Ark'fey. Ob'Ake went into detail about how he'd met famous mainland manuscript copiers whom Kerosi idolized. She asked what they were like and Ob'Ake gave her some unflattering anecdotes about how petty and self-important they were.

The conversation returned to Ob'Ake's tentative plan to travel north to darker Aq'Adez who were rumoured to be more progressive and welcoming of all Y'nari and cultures than their southern, lighter Aq'Adez counterparts.

"So darker Aq'Adez might not have a Pel Weskot or Pok Yewq?"

"Ideally not," Ob'Ake said.

"I may wish to join you then," Kerosi said, scraping the last of the food from her plate.

"Are you still hungry?" Ob'Ake asked.

"I think I may have eaten too much, in fact," Kerosi smiled. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Do you have a place to stay here in Yubikot?"

Kerosi shook her head.

"Well, you're welcome to stay here," Ob'Ake said. "I'm grateful for the conversation and companionship. It's been remarkably silent here since . . . and the art of reading has fallen out of favour in Yubikot as of late so the shop has been awfully quiet."

She didn't know what prompted it but a question burst into her mind.

“Do you know what an *erosikai* is?”

“I’ve heard that,” Ob’Ake scratched his beard. “I know I have. Where have I heard that?”

He stood up and walked over to one of the tables overflowing with books and scrolls. He stopped rummaging around when he realized the books he was looking for were downstairs in his shop. He disappeared down the stairwell again and returned after a while with yet another stack of books.

“The *erosikai* are ancient power sources,” he said, excitedly and began reading directly from one of the books. “*’Erosikai are the fragments of the erosys. A device meant to contain the power of a god. The erosys allowed the A’ua’ki to harness wu’jik before its power was released by Tarkondrius and the gift of wu’jik was given to all of Te’a.’* Why?”

Ob’Ake could see how hard Kerosi was struggling to stay awake and offered to make his bed for her.

“There’s a cot in storage downstairs that I can pull out for myself,” he said.

“I couldn’t take your bed,” Kerosi protested.

He raised a gentle hand at his side to silence her.

“No, no. I insist.”

CHAPTER 18

SA'TOMI CURSED HIMSELF FOR USING THE LAST of his Imperium chew too early. The fat, pulsing pain pounding behind his eyes competed with the screaming of his frazzled mind for his attention. He could barely stand so walking was nearly impossible. He'd laid down on the side of the road for awhile but the chaos in his mind was screeching at him that the Imperium was fast on his trail. Whether that was the truth or not was irrelevant as the wild terror behind his conviction made it so.

He started crawling down the road on his hands and knees. His tongue had swelled up and he was constantly biting the sides as he ground his teeth, drawing blood.

A child stood before him on the road. And then

she was gone. In the brief moment he'd seen her, he recognized the child but knew she was long dead and could not have been on the road before him. Sinister memories leapt out from the darkness of his mind and assaulted him.

"I shouldn't have left you," he shouted. "I'm sorry."

The child's voice spoke but she was not on the road with him.

"You did this," the voice said. "*You* did this."

He looked up from the dirt and all along the road were bodies run through with stakes. They were alive; gurgling and shaking.

"No!" Sa'tomi screamed and tried to push himself up onto his feet.

"You did this!"

More voices were joining the condemning choir.

He made it a few more steps before stumbling and hitting the dirt hard. He coughed painfully and blood-tinged, frothy spit sprayed out against the ground. He started to cry and pulled his knees to his chest.

The warming light of Mōt eventually forced him from his place on the ground to search for shade. The bodies on stakes had disappeared but their voices remained; screaming in his mind.

"YOU DID THIS!"

His whole body itched and ached for the feeling of Imperial chew to reinvigorate him. He was madly pressing his fingers into the seams of his pockets to

find even the tiniest crumb of the drug in his clothes. He realized that, if there had been any, the crumbs would have been in his Imperium soldier's garb that he'd torn off at the last burned-out settlement. He'd found a dead villager who was roughly his size and had taken their clothes instead.

He almost looked Aq'Adezean.

He just had to figure out what to do with his Tulean horns. That thought brought a frantic paranoia that crashed over him with the force of a tidal wave. He looked up and down the road he'd been travelling weighted down by the crazed anxiety of his withdrawal. His mind was telling him to burrow underneath the ground; to dig fistfuls of dirt with his bare hands until his fingers bled. Part of him was aware enough to crawl away from the road and toward the forest in the distance instead. He wandered, hungry and exhausted, through the woods for a length of time. He had no way of determining just how long while hallucinations taunted and condemned him.

Qi'Ar was raking its shadowy fingers through the trees making the branches appear unfriendly. Flickering orange light blinked ominously in front of him. It took him a few moments to realize it was the light of a campfire and not the eyes of sinister otherworldly creatures. As he neared, the voices in his head grew more vociferous. The orange light cast flickering shadows against the trees that took the form

of people he'd once loved, people he'd once killed, and evil supernatural creatures. All who wished to harm him.

"Stay away!" Sa'tomi screamed and swatted at the darkness clumsily.

"Easy," he heard a voice say but other voices chimed in with words of nefarious intent.

"Don't hurt me," Sa'tomi sobbed. "I'm sorry!"

Finally, his exhaustion overcame him and everything went silent; black.

Another gap of nothingness played out for a duration of time that he couldn't accurately measure. Gurgling up from the darkness were images of his family writhing in white-hot flames that covered their bodies. His childhood estate was engulfed in a roaring pyre that spit, hissed, and sparked angrily.

"Why would you run?" He heard his sister's voice.

"They looked for you," his mother's voice said.

"They couldn't find you . . ."

Bodies impaled by stakes reappeared on either side of him. The gory display of impaled bodies continued off in two long lines until they dissolved into blackness.

The bodies began pushing themselves up off their stakes with a wet squelching sound before plopping against the ground with a moist, phlegmy splat. One by one, they began crawling ever so slowly toward him.

"You did this!" They cried.

"Stop!" Sa'tomi shouted and fell on his hands and

knees!

“Easy!” A calmer voice joined the others.

“No! Stay away!”

“Careful, Evoq. He doesn’t look well.”

The crawling bodies had reached his feet and were pawing at him with grotesque, spindly fingers.

“Stay away!”

“Easy!”

Sa’tomi opened his crazed eyes. A pair of kind eyes were looking down at him and a cool cloth was rubbing the sweat from his brow.

“He’s awake,” the man smiled at him. “Are you alright?”

Sa’tomi was still feeling too weak to sit up and so instead used his tired eyes to scan around camp.

“Drink this,” a hand brought some liquid to Sa’tomi’s lips and he drank deeply. “Careful, not too much. You’re very dehydrated.”

“He’s a Tulean!” A frightened voice yelped.

“He could also be an Aq’Adezean from the contested lands,” another voice replied.

Sa’tomi floated in and out of consciousness until a calm, steady voice entered his ears.

“And their words were met with rejoicing for the hard times had come to an end. They lifted their voices in praise to he who conquered evil; he who dispersed the darkness. In his name, they found the peace that had eluded them during the times of hardship.”

Sa'tomi could feel the inertia of movement yet he was sure he wasn't walking. His eyes fluttered open and we saw he was laying in a wooden cart lined with hay and blankets.

"He's coming around," the voice said.

There was a loud slap as the Y'nari closed the Oglisa he was reading from.

"How are you feeling?"

"Tired," Sa'tomi coughed. "Thirsty. Hungry."

The Pod'ka nodded as he followed slowly beside the cart.

"Your fever broke during the night," the Pod'ka said.

"Where am I?" Sa'tomi blinked his dry eyes.

"We're on the road to Korsik. My name is Evoq. I'm . . . I was the spiritual leader of the village of Wekon," he smiled and reached out to shake Sa'tomi's hand who was still dopily blinking his eyes.

Eventually, Evoq retracted his hand and placed it on the Oglisa under his left arm.

"We're all that remains of Wekon, Tyr, Elmot, and the surrounding villages," Evoq said sombrely gesturing at the caravan of slow-moving, exhausted refugees. "Where are you from?"

Initially, Sa'tomi only pretended to fall back asleep to avoid the spiritual leader's question but soon drifted off into darkness.

CHAPTER 19

KEROSI DREAMED OF HER LIFE ON THE ISLAND. She could feel the cool spray of the mist the ocean cast off as its waves threw themselves against the rocks. She could smell something burning and she saw Qisaq erupt into flame. She could hear screaming.

Kerosi shot up into a seated position in Ob'Ake's bed. Sucking in frenzied shallow breaths. She could still smell something burning. There were sounds of rustling in Ob'Ake's kitchen and someone muttering obscenities.

She rose out of his bed slowly and cautiously made her way to the door-frame. She anxiously poked her head out to see Ob'Ake rushing around the kitchen.

"Everything okay?"

Her voice startled Ob'Ake and then he started laughing. He threw up his arms in defeat.

"Qera was the cook," he admitted. "Since she passed I've just been eating at the various shops around the district."

He took the burnt food off the stove and scraped it into the trash.

"I didn't notice your horrendous cooking last night," Kerosi teased. "I really enjoyed it."

"That's because it was made by a talented ur'ka from a restaurant down the street," he chuckled. "In fact, let's pay her a visit."

When they left, they had to again step over a large plank that ran along the bottom of the front door. She hadn't noticed it last night but looking around the street she realized that every building had that same wooden plank across the bottom of the doors.

"Those horizontal planks are called *Spirit Gates*," Ob'Ake said when he noticed where Kerosi was looking. "Y'nari have to step over the Spirit Gates to enter buildings because they believe evil spirits cannot."

"I bet that's fun in the middle of Qi'Ar," Kerosi laughed.

As they walked, Ob'Ake told her about the architecture and history of his district. Technically, it was called *the New Market District* but there was a newer market district closer to the upper-class estates that had been constructed a few decades earlier called

the Espera Kol Marketplace. The New Market District was, however, newer than the original Old Market Square that was now situated in the slums of eastern Yubikot. Now, it had been re-purposed into low-income apartments and the headquarters of less than reputable businesses.

On their walk to the restaurant, there was a crowd gathered around a shop that Pod'ka in dark uniforms were trying to disperse. As they neared, Kerosi saw a large blue eye painted on the exterior of the shop that the officials were trying to cover with a blanket while others attempted to wash it off. The street was littered with pamphlets that blew around in the wind.

"What's that about?"

"That's the symbol of the A'ji," Ob'Ake said quietly as they passed.

"The A'ji?" Kerosi recalled hearing the name before but couldn't place where. "Who are they?"

Ob'Ake shushed her gently with a subtle hand gesture close to his chest. He waited until they were far out of earshot of the Yubikot police before explaining further.

"The A'ji are the resistance," Ob'Ake started. "Even before the Imperium began its incursion into Aq'Adezean territory, the A'ji fought local powers who seemed only to care about the needs of the aristocracy. The A'ji started as a political party but those who controlled power made membership illegal. Now there

are only three approved political parties in Aq'Adez. All three are focused on maintaining the status quo with only minor differences separating them that are pretty inconsequential to anyone who isn't already wealthy and influential. They've started heavily restricting who can vote and are making it more and more difficult for regular Y'nari to obtain the proper identification to vote for those who still can. I guess it could be worse. I *could* live in a prefecture that withdrew from Aq'Adez altogether like Es'Opar or Hiko who are fast returning to the way things were in the Warlord period. Or maybe that's just something I tell myself while I'm stuck here in Yubikot refusing to decide between staying and leaving."

"The A'ji go around painting eyes on walls?" Kerosi asked.

"Among other things," Ob'Ake said. "They also distribute pamphlets about the corruption of the three official parties and calls for non-violent resistance. The papers are telling us they're responsible for some massacres of merchants and diplomats on various trade routes but I'm sure that's just propaganda meant to distract from the revelations the A'ji are bringing to light."

When they arrived at the restaurant, the ur'ka at the door greeted Ob'Ake warmly but had to quickly shake away a frown that appeared on her brow when she saw Kerosi. She smiled sweetly but it was visibly

insincere.

“You have a guest with you today, Ob’Ake?”

“I do,” Ob’Ake said. “Will that be a problem?”

“No problem,” the ur’ka smiled even larger and her eyes closed entirely.

She led them to their table and gave Ob’Ake a menu then abruptly left to attend to other guests without addressing Kerosi at all.

“I apologize,” Ob’Ake said after the ur’ka left.

“Not necessary,” Kerosi said. “Even with Qera’s clothes, I guess my Azai horns give me away.”

“I have an old veshi of Qera’s back at the apartment from when we went travelling along the Crimson Coast,” Ob’Ake said. “It will cover your horns and, with your red hair, Y’nari will just think you’re on a pilgrimage. Remind me to grab it out of storage when we get back.”

A veshi was the traditional head covering worn by the indigenous Y’nari of the Crimson Coast called the Toshida. Kerosi had copied a text not that long ago that included passages about the Toshida and their history and customs. They shared a common history with the Azai before the ancient leaders, Tos and Grix, parted ways. Tos and her followers stayed on the mainland becoming the Toshida while Grix and the others sailed across the sea to find their island home becoming the Azai.

The wind blew something against her leg. When she reached down to check what it was, Ob’Ake had

already seen it and quietly suggested caution. It was a pamphlet with a big blue eye on it like the one painted on the wall of the shop. Ob'Ake motioned for her to slip it into her pocket.

There was a big newspaper folded on top of an unoccupied seat one table over and Ob'Ake picked it up and came to sit beside Kerosi. He spread the newspaper open wide and then quietly instructed Kerosi to retrieve the pamphlet and open it within the larger newspaper.

Beneath the blue eye were bold letters that said:

TOGETHER WE CAN STOP THEM!

When she opened up the pamphlet, there was a caricature of a wealthy Aq'Adezean and an Imperium Ba'Tar assaulting a cowering ur'ka and a child. Beneath them, it said:

**AQ'ADEZ IS UNDER SIEGE FROM
WITHIN AND WITHOUT.**

On the other side of the page, the wealthy Aq'Adezean and the Imperium Ba'Tar both looked frightened and were shrinking back from a depiction of an A'ji warrior with a large blue eye on his chest. The warrior was shielding the ur'ka and the child behind him while raising a large sword into the air. Beneath him were the words:

THE WAY OUT IS THROUGH.

Kerosi turned to the back of the pamphlet where it stated in red letters:

JOIN THE A'JI RESISTANCE

“Are you ready to order?” The waitress returned and Ob'Ake quickly shut the newspaper.

She only addressed Ob'Ake.

“We haven't had a chance to look at the menu yet, thank you,” Ob'Ake said closing the newspaper and returning to his side of the table. “If you could give us a few moments that would be much appreciated.”

She smiled her fake smile silently and moved on to another table.

From her side of the table, Kerosi could read the headline of the Yubikot newspaper.

TREATY STANDS!

WOL PROMISES SCOPE OF INVASION LIMITED

“Who's Wol?” Kerosi asked pointing at the headline. Ob'Ake turned the paper around to see what Kerosi was looking at.

“*Wol Be'Akosil* is the official in charge of the

Aq'Adezean military in the west," Ob'Ake took a moment to skim the article. "He says that he's been in contact with the Imperium and that citizens of Aq'Adez should not fear a large-scale invasion. He claims that only territory in the contested lands will be targeted by the Imperium invasion."

"Any mention of the invasion of Qisaq?"

"That won't be in the papers," Ob'Ake shook his head. "I only know because of my connections. Most Yubikot residents are uncurious and have a limited understanding of anything beyond the city save for what appears in approved news publications. See this?"

He pointed to the bottom of the page at a large black stamp.

**EDITED AND FACT-CHECKED BY
THE HIGH COUNCIL OF TRUTH**

CHAPTER 20

“*‘THE WHITE BIRDS HAD SPREAD ACROSS the land, dispersing the Y’nari where they found them to the edges of Te’a. Their light purified the wicked and made clean the soil and skies alike.*

“Where hast thou a home in Ovin? Where hast thou a home in Vol when the white birds will never cease their pursuit?’ The Y’nari of the age cried. ‘Shall we not still perish if we go? Why shouldn’t we stay in Asmita?’”

Sa’tomi slowly woke to the sounds of the spiritual leader reading passages of the Oglisa loudly to him.

The refugee caravan had stopped and he was no longer lying in the back of a cart but on a makeshift bedroll next to a fire.

“You’re awake,” the spiritual leader smiled as he

closed the Oglisa.

As Sa'tomi looked around he could see the number of refugees in the camp had grown. He had no way of knowing just how long he'd been out but it was mostly dark again. He couldn't tell if it was early in the ossa or on the verge of Qi'Ar.

"How are you feeling?" The spiritual leader asked.

"My head is throbbing," Sa'tomi said. "And I'm very hungry."

"We don't have much but I'll bring over some food for you," the spiritual leader rose from Sa'tomi's side and disappeared from the light of the fire.

As Sa'tomi looked around, he could see some unfriendly eyes glowering at him.

"Are you from the contested lands?" An excited voice asked him.

When he turned, an Y'nari was kneeling next to his bedroll wearing a dusty and torn outfit that almost looked like a costume. He was clearly a Sun'Ynarr but his dress was like that of an ancient Tul'Ynarr from the Olix period.

"I'm from the Gest prefecture," the Sun'Ynarr in the Tul'Ynarr outfit said. "Just straddling the contested lands. My name is Ut'Emik."

Ut'Emik made the traditional hand gesture of a Tul'Ynarr greeting.

"Greetings Ut'Emik," Sa'tomi returned the gesture and it seemed to excite the other Y'nari.

“Greetings,” Ut’Emik grinned before bombarding Sa’tomi with questions about what life was like in the contested lands and how long he’d lived there.

Sa’tomi tried to answer Ut’Emik’s questions as vaguely as possible while he anxiously looked around for the spiritual leader who was supposed to be returning with food.

Ut’Emik started into a monologue rant about living in a prefecture that was a “bastion of the old ways”. Those in the Gest prefecture purposely tried to live as though they were locked within the time of the Olix period: dress, architecture, Tul’Ynarr customs. Since that region of Aq’Adez had been traditionally Tulean during the Olix period, the citizens of the Gest prefecture had believed that the invading Tuleans would be liberators who would strengthen their position in Aq’Adez. Evidently, they too were forcibly relocated along with all of the other Sun’Ynarr of the western prefectures lining their border with the contested lands.

The group was on their way to a capital city of the region where they’d heard about a revolutionary group called the A’ji who were looking for members to enlist against both the invading Imperium and the oppressive Aq’Adezeans. Ut’Emik showed Sa’tomi that they had pamphlets about the A’ji claiming they were offering sanctuary to anyone who needed it.

Mercifully, the spiritual leader returned and shooed away the costumed Sun’Ynarr saying that

Sa'tomi needed his rest.

"Thank you," Sa'tomi whispered to the spiritual leader after Ut'Emik had gone.

The spiritual leader just nodded and began to feed him warm soup. When the bowl was empty, he began reading to Sa'tomi again from the Olgisa until late into Qi'Ar when he left Sa'tomi's side to find his own bedroll. After that, no one else came to talk to Sa'tomi. It was humid and warm and the fire was causing him to sweat. Sa'tomi pushed himself up into a seated position before slowly rising to his feet. His balance was still shaky but the strength in his legs had mostly returned.

Sa'tomi looked out across the camp and saw there were four other fires circled by sleeping refugees. The caravan had indeed grown considerably since he'd been out.

He realized that since the refugees seemed to think he was from the contested lands he would have to play into their belief to conceal his true identity. However, he didn't know much at all about the contested lands. For countless generations, his family had called the central plains of Tul home. Far, far away from the political realities of the frontier.

Peculiar lights danced in the sky in the distance. Sa'tomi took a few steps away from the light of the fire to better see the shimmering dots in the sky. They were getting larger; growing nearer. They were multi-coloured and seemed to float, sway, and twirl in hypnotic

ways. He couldn't look away. As the lights grew closer, he could see long clear tendrils that flowed behind like light fabric in water. The closer they came, the clearer he was able to make out that the lights were part of floating gelatinous creatures. Radiating out from inside their clear bodies. The creatures pulsed and hummed soothingly; ominously. They began to descend upon the camp.

An Y'nari screamed and immediately the whole refugee camp was launched into a chaotic frenzy of terror. They were shouting out the name of the clear, floating intruders but Sa'tomi had never heard of such creatures before. The refugees were stumbling over each other to flee into the trees but Sa'tomi was frozen in place; watching the chaos numbly.

Up close, the floating creatures were astonishingly large. Their long tendrils reached down at the fleeing Y'nari. Wrapping around limbs and pulling them into the sky. The tendrils made a sizzling sound when they touched the exposed flesh of the Y'nari who immediately became limp as they rose into the sky. The tendrils pulled the paralyzed Y'nari into the clear, central sack among the hypnotic, dancing lights; enveloping them.

Sa'tomi saw the fear in their immobile eyes as their skin began to blush red before their eyes dissolved completely. Next, their skin and hair melted into a dark, liquid aura around their form that dispersed into the clear gelatin of the creature. Then their muscles

were revealed and, finally, their bones, which hung weightlessly inside the floating gelatinous creature before they too dissolved away to become a red blemish among the pulsing lights within.

The whole gory process was terrifyingly quick. Sa'tomi's body started to flee for the trees before he was consciously aware that he was running. He tripped twice and narrowly avoided being snagged by one of the creatures' tendrils. He clumsily pushed himself back up and stumbled past a Sun'Ynarr who was immobilized with fear, staring up at the floating creatures the others were calling *Ezar*. Moments after passing the frightened Sun'Ynarr, she was snatched up into sky and pulled inside the Ezar where she was quickly and horrifically digested.

When Sa'tomi finally reached the tree-line, he threw himself into the safety of the branches and shrubs at the edge of the forest. He turned back and could only watch as the Ezar continued to snatch up the last Y'nari stragglers; pulling their still, limp forms into the clear gelatin of their Ezar bodies to be dissolved among the beautiful, pulsing lights.

CHAPTER 21

“YUBIKOT USED TO BE THE CULTURAL EPICENTRE of the Soyok prefecture, possibly all of western Aq’Adez,” Ob’Ake said. “Now, most of the independent bookstores have been taken over by the High Council of Truth and the ones that haven’t are frequently raided. I’ve been spared largely because no one comes to buy books from my store anyway.”

After breakfast, they walked around the district talking together. Kerosi could tell that Ob’Ake was working himself up to a decision about leaving Yubikot altogether and she was not-so-subtly encouraging him.

“It sounds like you’ve made your mind up about this city,” Kerosi said.

“I’d made my mind up about leaving even before

Qera passed,” Ob’Ake said. “She was the one who wanted us to stay. She always said that if we didn’t stay to bring about the change that we wanted, we’d only be ensuring that nothing here would ever change.”

“That’s a heavy weight to carry,” Kerosi said.

“I mean, she’s right. Isn’t she?” Ob’Ake sighed. “It’s easy for me to just leave this behind but what of the people who cannot leave? I have the privilege of just heading north and starting new somewhere else. Am I abandoning those who need my help?”

“What help could you provide?”

Ob’Ake thought about it a moment.

“I was going to say that I provide knowledge but no one comes into my store to buy anything. Not even to browse,” he said.

“Before, I thought that leaving for my own reasons was selfish,” Kerosi started. “But then staying for others caused the death of my friend.”

“I’m sorry,” Ob’Ake said.

She nodded sombrely. “Prioritizing your own safety and well-being is not selfish. You do not owe the world anything as the world does not owe anything to you.”

“It sounds like there’s a lot of hurt behind those words,” Ob’Ake said. “I wonder if you truly mean them. We are all together in this life and we are all stronger together. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

After they returned from their walk, Kerosi stayed at Ob’Ake’s apartment throughout the ossa. Ob’Ake

excused himself to run some errands. He returned later with an exuberance that made Kerosi smile. He revealed that he'd spent the ossa making arrangements to finally leave the city. A landlord who'd been asking about his space for a while was still interested in purchasing it from Ob'Ake when he went back to visit him.

"Qera said when we had enough money she wanted to take me to see the floating ruins of Es'Etik in darker Aq'Adez on the edge of *the Swamp of Sug'ogg*. Now I'll have more than enough," he smiled.

"Will the landlord just take over your shop or do they have other plans for the building?"

"Oh, I think he'll turn it into apartments or a new commercial space," Ob'Ake said. "Definitely not a bookstore though."

"What's going to happen to all your wonderful books?" Kerosi asked and instantly saw Ob'Ake's face droop sadly.

"I'm going to have to leave them behind," he said. "I can't take them with me and it's painfully evident that no one's willing to purchase them."

"Could I have a few?"

Ob'Ake smiled broadly. "Of course, Kerosi. Take as many as you wish."

Long into Qi'Ar, they talked with one another about their past, about those they'd lost, dreams they had, things they still wished to do.

Ob'Ake gifted Qera's backpack to Kerosi filled with

books from the early kingdom, books about Asmita pre-history, his copy of *The Crimson Insurrection of Grix*, and Qera's veshi.

"Hey shopkeep!" A loud, grating voice called from outside.

Ob'Ake moved to the window and saw the group of Pel Weskot from the other ossa carrying torches. Behind them, a group of police in armour stood menacingly with weapons at their sides. To their left were two officials Ob'Ake recognized from the High Council of Truth.

"Kerosi, there's a back-door down the corridor at the base of the stairs," he breathed tensely. "I'll deal with them while you go out the back. Do you remember the building with the red roof we passed on our walk? The one beside the tea room?"

Kerosi nodded.

"Do you think you'll know how to find your way there?"

"I . . . I think so?"

"I'll keep them distracted here and I'll meet you there once I can get away," Ob'Ake said.

"Why not just come with me now?"

"Shopkeeper Ob'Ake! Come out immediately or we will come retrieve you by force!" An authoritative voice called from the street.

"It'll be fine," Ob'Ake said. "Hurry."

"Please come with me now!" She whispered as

loudly and sternly as she could.

“I’ll be right there!” Ob’Ake shouted through the open window to the group of Y’nari standing outside.

He silently motioned for her to leave.

“It’ll be okay,” Ob’Ake whispered. “I’ll see you shortly at the red-roofed building by the tea room.”

She grabbed Qera’s backpack and swung it over her shoulder before quietly descending the stairs and rushing down the corridor to the back door. She entered the empty back alley and was about to flee but then she heard Ob’Ake’s voice calling to the Pel Weskot.

“What can I do for you this fine Qi’A-“

She heard the heavy thud that silenced Ob’Ake. And then she heard another. And another. There were flickering lights that filled the alley followed by intense shouting that bounced aggressively about the tight space. Astonishingly quickly, she saw the flames licking up into the sky. She started walking again and fought with her body not to charge down the alley at full speed. She kept stealing glances behind every so often to see if anyone was following her but those who were on the street were singularly focused on the burning building spewing black smoke that rose ominously into the Qi’Ar sky.

CHAPTER 22

SHE DIDN'T NORMALLY DREAM. So infrequently in fact that she couldn't remember the last time her dreams had been so vivid. That Qi'Ar, Ka'Cyr dreamt about how the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos had saved her as a child. It stuck quite closely to the narrative she'd been told by the Order who'd saved her. Except in this dream, there was an ur'ka she didn't remember. Imagined or real, Ka'Cyr immediately felt the newly remembered ur'ka held a secret significance. Exactly how she was significant was frustratingly elusive.

There was a knock at her cabin door.

"Your Grace," Destim called to her from the other side of the cabin door.

Ka'Cyr groggily sat up and rubbed her tired eyes.

As Ka'Cyr put on clothes, she longed for the warm bath that awaited her once they made landfall.

She opened the cabin door and let Destim in.

"I may have found a way to repair your staff, Your Grace," Destim had been meditating most of the voyage but admitted he needed to consult with other Grokix about his plan when they arrived at the port.

"How are we going to tell them the staff was damaged?" Ka'Cyr asked.

"I will inquire in hypotheticals. No need to bring attention to specifics," Destim replied. "I brought you your tonic."

He passed her a vial of an almost luminescent liquid that she quickly downed in one gulp before handing the empty vial back to Destim. Immediately, she felt invigorated and alert.

"I'm sorry your tonic regimen has been irregular," Destim said. "We've had to space them out until we can resupply when we reach the mainland. Have you noticed any negative side effects?"

"Can I blame my irritability and rash, impulsivity on missing my tonic?" Ka'Cyr smirked.

"Sorry, my dear, but those are both preexisting conditions," he smiled back.

"I have been noticing vivid dreams," Ka'Cyr said.

Destim frowned.

"What are they about?" He asked.

"When you saved me from the monks as a child,"

she said.

“We’re close to port now,” Destim said as Ka’Cyr finished donning her armour and dark, demonic helmet before they took to the deck. “I’ll make sure you have plenty of tonic on the next leg of our journey.”

Ka’Cyr had an idealized perception of the city of Nesoq in her mind since she’d first read about it as a child. The city had featured prominently in many histories and ancient legends of the region. Before it was Nesoq during the Warlord Period, the city was an A’ua’ki outpost called Parsolot. Parsolot had been one of the A’ua’ki’s floating cities before a decisive battle between Tarkondrius’ rebel Y’nari forces and the crumbling A’ua’ki empire brought the city down from the sky where it stayed for over a thousand Os. Eventually, materials scavenged from the ruins were used to create Nesoq making it a symbol of the Warlord Kuixo’s might and importance. In recent generations, Nesoq had become both the primary port of the Crimson Coast connecting multiple trade routes and a vibrant tourist destination bringing in visitors from all across Asmita.

Now, Nesoq was smouldering. Dark pillars of smoke were rising into the sky at various points across the city. Most of the shipyard was still intact but the once ornate city walls were devastatingly damaged and breached in many places. The Imperium flag flew high above the former Aq’Adezean capital of the Ye’Suyek

prefecture. Most of the western coast of Aq'Adez had fallen to the Imperium. Now that they held both the Azai port at Qisaq and the port city of Nesoq, the Imperium's naval supremacy was all but ensured.

It took a while to safely navigate their ship into port and then another period to disembark. As Ka'Cyr left the crew to unload their military cargo and personal belongings, she saw the teams of civilian hostages the Imperium were using as a slave labour force to clear away the rubble from the city streets while soldiers and Imperium officials stomped around triumphantly on military business. There was a pang of mourning and grief in her chest for a Nesoq she would never get to see.

She considered going out and finding an undamaged Inn to soak in that warm bath she'd been longing for but the anxiety of the Order uncovering what she'd done to Ba'Tar Og'Adi at Qisaq was corralling her toward the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos headquarters at a brisk pace. When she arrived, she was debriefed by a regional Imperium official who seemed not to know what Ka'Cyr had done on the island. She didn't tell them.

Ka'Cyr relayed what little information she had about their search for the erosikai and the Grokix assassinations before planning their next course of action. An official informed her about yet another Grokix assassination as they were resupplied before their next leg of the expedition. Afterward, she met with another

Sen'Daris Er'Ebos contact at the docks who reiterated how important finding the erosikai was for the Order. Despite being allied, the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos wished to retrieve the relic before the Imperium.

Outside the window, animals called yewpips were scavenging for food among the charred, smoking remnants of the city. They chittered and howled as they leapt from tree branch to tree branch and roof to damaged roof picking through rubble with their nimble claws for whatever they could find.

“Don’t feed them,” an official with a bandage over one eye said to Ka’Cyr. “They’ll get used to being fed and they’ll stick around and become even more of a nuisance than they already are. They’re known to get aggressive when they don’t get their way.”

In the time Ka’Cyr had been meeting with her contacts in the Order, Destim had been able to acquire the reagents he needed for his location spell that would track the residual energy of the erosikai eventually leading them to the northeast.

When the ritual was complete, Destim went off in search of other Grokix to discuss how best to repair a *hypothetically* damaged Sen'Daris Er'Ebos staff.

Ka’Cyr was finally able to have her bath.

CHAPTER 23

KEROSI NERVOUSLY ADJUSTED THE VESHI on her head as she waited anxiously at the tea room across from the red-roofed building for Ob'Ake to arrive but he never did. The veshi indeed covered her horns but the fabric made her scalp sweaty and itchy. Yubikot citizens weren't any friendlier while she was wearing the veshi but none had openly glared at her as they had when her Azai horns were showing.

It was mid-ossa when she quietly returned to Ob'Ake's shop to find barricades blocking access to the street flanked by armoured city guards.

The cowards had burnt it to the ground.

All that knowledge.

All those stories.

Gone forever.

There was a large, dark stain on the ground outside the bookstore where Ob'Ake had confronted the Pel Weskot. From the size of the stain, there must've been an incredible amount of blood.

Kerosi froze and began to hyperventilate. She wanted to scream. She wanted to race towards the guards and claw out their eyes in a vociferous rage. All she could do was stand where she was, breathing erratically.

She locked eyes with one of the guards. He narrowed his eyes and she couldn't tell if it was because of the light of Mōt or if he was becoming suspicious of the veshi-wearing ur'ka hyperventilating in the centre of the street.

She quickly turned around and began walking, briskly, in the opposite direction. She didn't turn around to see if she'd attracted the guard's attention. She kept staring rigidly forward until the New Market district was long behind her and she was back among the impoverished tents and kiosks selling dubious food in the outer city.

Once she reached the edge of Yubikot, Kerosi slumped down on her knees in the sand and cried.

There was a wind-beaten signpost pointing in many directions. East to the Hiko prefecture and the Ix'Arki in the jungle, west behind her to Yubikot, south to the city of Nesoq on the Crimson Coast, and north

into the Narvix prefecture and the Ek'Ander sand sea.

Instead of making a decision she reached into Qera's backpack Ob'Ake had given her and began reading one of the books on pre-history as a way to distract herself. Her feelings of regret over leaving Ob'Ake to his dark fate kept interrupting her concentration and prevented her from retaining any of what she read. She scanned the same page at least four times before she threw the book in frustration. It landed, open, on an ancient map of Aq'Adez. Someone (she assumed either Qera or Ob'Ake) had circled a place on the map northeast of the Ek'Ander sand sea and written 'Es'Etik' above it.

CHAPTER 24

HER SUPERIORS IN NESOQ REARRANGED the members of Ka'Cyr's party for the next leg of the expedition into Aq'Adez in search of the erosikai and the identity of whoever was assassinating the Grokix. They'd swapped out all of the senior officers in her party for newer recruits as seasoned soldiers were needed to assist the Imperium with engagements along contested lands territory where the invasion was faltering and failing to make progress as fast as the Imperium military had strategized for.

The new recruits seemed eager and capable enough but Ka'Cyr was particularly resentful that the camaraderie of the unit she had built could be so quickly destabilized and dismantled by outside forces.

At least they hadn't taken Destim, she sighed.

With her unit being that much smaller, Vo'dis Ka'Cyr pushed them all to journey at an almost frantic pace. They'd left the red sand beaches of the coast behind and had crossed the dunes of the Meriko sand sea remarkably quickly. Ka'Cyr was begrudgingly impressed with the way the new recruits were keeping pace with her but thankfully her emotions were securely hidden behind her grotesque Vo'dis helmet and her dark Sen'Daris Er'Ebos armour.

At the edge of the Meriko sand sea, half-buried A'ua'ki ruins poked out from beneath the dunes. Destim signalled for them to stop.

"Your grace, the temple forge, if it still exists, should be in these ruins," he whispered to her. "It's our best chance at repairing your staff."

"All right," Vo'dis Ka'Cyr shouted to her unit. "We make camp here."

She started to walk toward the ruins with Grokix Destim and a diminutive voice called to her.

"Your grace, you shouldn't go on ahead without--"

She rose a gauntlet to silence the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos recruit.

"I will do as I wish," Ka'Cyr said with a dark gravitas from behind her helmet.

The recruit was silent and went back to setting up their camp with the others.

Her leg muscles burned and ached. Trudging

through the sand in full armour was hot and exhausting. Ka'Cyr wanted nothing more than to lay down in her tent and rest but she kept her posture taught and her movements intentioned and graceful while she was still within the gaze of the recruits.

"What are our chances, Destim?" Ka'Cyr asked when she knew she was far enough away from camp for anyone to overhear.

"In Aq'Adez, this is our only option," Destim explained. "If we returned to Tul there may have been a few other options open to us but, this far into Aq'Adez, the forge at the Bosq'elis Temple ruins is our only course of action."

Bosq'elis was the ancient site of many Sun'Ynarr festivals and rituals in the time of the Warlords. It was said that there was a hidden A'ua'ki city beneath the temple that could only be accessed by destroying oneself and reforming again within the secret city underneath the dunes. Many of the old rituals involved self-sacrifice in an attempt to gain access to the secret city. Those who watched the destruction could only assume that the Y'nari were reconstructed on the other side but had no way of knowing for sure except through faith.

As they entered the ruins of Bosq'elis, Ka'Cyr could somehow feel the site was charged with an energy that she couldn't explain yet sensed all the same.

"It must be here," Destim said. "I can feel the power emanating from the ruins."

“You restrain a god!” A voice behind one of the aged pillars shocked Ka’Cyr into a defensive stance. “Gods must be free.”

“Show yourself,” Ka’Cyr shouted.

A group of many robed Y’nari stepped into view surrounding Ka’Cyr and Destim on all sides. Ka’Cyr recognized the robes they wore and gripped her staff tightly.

They were Sansarcs.

“I am Vo’dis Ka’Cyr of the Sen’Daris Er’Ebos,” she bellowed. “You will leave this place immediately or we will be forced to take action against you.”

The robed Y’nari stared at them silently.

“Leave now!” Ka’Cyr shouted.

In a rapid burst of movement, the Sansarcs descended up on them in unison. They seemed only to focus on acquiring Ka’Cyr’s staff. She punched the nearest robed Y’nari with her gauntlet and heard a sickening crack as it connected. Another leapt onto Ka’Cyr’s back and tried to wrest the staff away from her. Destim launched a small but powerful sphere of green energy at an attacker who was blown off into the nearest pillar, landing in a crumpled heap at its base with a smoking hole in his chest. More Sansarcs poured down the steps of the ruins toward them.

Ka’Cyr started to will power into the staff in her hand but it was sparking and sizzling angrily. She pulled her sword from her sheath instead.

“Get the others!” Ka’Cyr shrieked to Destim who started to protest but she shouted again. “Now, Destim!”

The Sansarcs were unarmed and Ka’Cyr ran them through as they came close. They didn’t seem deterred or frightened of Ka’Cyr but were singularly focused on obtaining her staff. They reached out for it with wild, frenzied fervor and weren’t concerned about Destim at all.

She heard Destim make a pained screech. Ka’Cyr turned to see a figure wearing inconspicuous, ragged clothes standing over him in the sand with their hand palming his head. The figure was drawing out hazy green energy from Destim who was immobilized.

“Destim!” She screamed to him.

The Sansarcs were overwhelming her but they weren’t attacking her. They only seemed concerned with acquiring her staff. She tossed it across the ruins and the Sansarcs raced away from her to where the damaged staff had landed.

Ka’Cyr bolted down the ruins steps toward the dark figure who saw her long before Ka’Cyr raised her sword to cut her down. The figure stopped siphoning off Destim’s green energy; dropping him limply against the sand. The figure conjured a roiling ball of energy between their hands and ejected it straight into the breastplate of Ka’Cyr’s armour. Ka’Cyr flew backward and landed on her back. She hadn’t fastened the chin strap of her grotesque helmet and it went flying off into

the sand.

As Ka'Cyr coughed and wheezed, the figure stepped closer until they were standing over her. Glowing spheres of energy encircled their hands but but the figure hesitated.

Ka'Cyr was waiting for a killing blow but when she opened her eyes the figure was gone. A faint groaning could be heard coming from the smoking, twitching form of Destim as he lay in the sand a ways away from her.

In the distance, the Sansarcs were repeatedly striking Ka'Cyr's staff against the ruins until it exploded in a burst of green energy. The Sansarcs cheered and dispersed into the dunes.

CHAPTER 25

KEROSI LOVED READING BOOKS WRITTEN by the historian Eq'Perodinos whom Ob'Ake had revealed was gratingly obnoxious when he'd interacted with him in person. Regardless of who he was as an Y'nari, Kerosi adored the way Eq'Perodinos wrote. His works were very conversational as if he were an old friend sharing knowledge over tea by a warm fire. Qera's backpack slung over Kerosi's shoulder contained two: one about ancient Kent and the other about Aq'Adez in the aftermath of the Green Wave.

She took frequent breaks on her trek along the edge of the sand sea to read about the Ghost Speakers of ancient Kent. Eq'Perodinos wrote that Ghost Speakers were able to create spirit weapons, called *Ogglim*, out

of regular weapons through secret rituals empowering them with the ability to siphon off the souls of those felled by the Ogglim's blade.

She switched back and forth between the two books. In the other, she read about theories of what caused the Green Wave. Some believed a beast that lived beneath the surface of Te'a had burst forth, raining devastation down upon the four realms. Others, that the race of Y'nari who lived underground, called the Ysat'Ynarr, had created an energy weapon to wreak vengeance upon the above-worlders who'd forced them below the surface.

The accepted historical cause of the Green Wave was Tarkondrius' rebellion against the A'ua'ki. Many corroborating texts described how Tarkondrius freed an entity that the A'ua'ki had imprisoned within a mysterious artifact called the Erosys that allowed them to harness its power. In Eq'Perodinos' account, when Tarkondrius released the entity from its prison within the Erosys artifact, wu'jik was made accessible to all of Te'a. Contemporary historians believed that wu'jik was nothing more than a supernatural romanticization of the past. Kerosi's firsthand experience with wu'jik proved that it was very much a real phenomenon.

Later on, there was a chapter about K'yu. Handcrafted mechanical constructs powered by an unimaginably intricate technology lost in the wake of the Green Wave. If any were still active, Eq'Perodinos

postulated that the last of the K'yu would be found either in ruins built into mountains high enough to have been spared the destruction wrought by the Green Wave or in ancient A'ua'ki complexes deep underground.

Originally, the K'yu were introduced to Te'a as mechanical servants, workers, and administrators. The K'yu now survived within Y'nari literature. These *fictionalized* K'yu were left to define their own meaning after their A'ua'ki creators were destroyed or fled in the aftermath of the Green Wave. Some powered down in a kind of voluntary dormancy, others used their mechanical immortality to expand their horizons and explore jobs and tasks other than that for which they were created. In some cases, this led them to become adventurers. Legends of these immortal adventurers were a common trope in literature of the early kingdom. The most famous of which was a K'yu by the name of Av'Entos. Historians argue whether Av'Entos was purely a work of fiction or if their exploits were based on a real K'yu. Some claimed every K'yu was connected and, together, could be considered a singular being. Eq'Perodinos called it *E'taido Shin*; different body, same mind. Using that same technology, the A'ua'ki civilization was said to have devices which could transfer thoughts and memories simply through touch. Eq'Perodinos himself claimed that, when he'd visited an A'ua'ki ruin in the now inaccessible realm of Qi'Arsus beyond the mountains far in the west, he'd encountered

technology that allowed for him to acquire lost A'ua'ki knowledge through touch alone. The comprehension he'd gained ceased the instant he stopped touching the objects but, while his fingers were pressed against the metal maps posted around the ruins, knowledge of his location within the ruins was transferred wordlessly into his mind. In this same expedition, Eq'Perodinos claimed the plaques directed him to an ancient library where knowledge was not stored on parchment and ink but within sheets of metal. His account stated that he had touched the metal with one hand and recorded the knowledge in his notebook with the other. One of the metal sheets described a heretical history of Te'a. Te'a was not the only world that existed but one of many that made up an *empire of worlds*. There was a gateway that the metal sheet referred to as *the tunnel in the sky* that had once connected Te'a to the rest of the *empire of worlds* but was destroyed by ancient corrupt rulers who wished to keep Te'a confined and controlled.

Kerosi was becoming weak with hunger. She ventured into the jungle briefly to find berries and seeds that would hold her over until the next village. What she found did little to curb her hunger.

Kerosi stopped walking again and began reading from the book on ancient Kent and its degeneration into *the Blighted Lands*. In places where the blight had become particularly concentrated, the Y'nari changed to varying degrees. Some became blighted ones who

hosted a sentient form of the blight giving them a symbiotic relationship with the blight. These sentient blight, or Xi'O, could act independently from their host, together in cooperation, or completely hijack their host for their own ends.

Xi'O lived in colonies. Each colony was made up of three types of Xi'O serving a singular Queen. *Drones* made up the majority of the colony. Drones were equipped with chitinous plating and grew a pair of flexible tendrils supplementing the limbs of their host. These delicate yet powerful limb-like appendages would sprout from the host's back and assist in a variety of tasks.

The second type of Xi'O was called a *Seeker*. Seekers searched for prospective hosts in the areas surrounding the colony. As such, their forms were less obtrusive and were gifted with powerful psionic abilities. They could communicate telepathically and calm the emotions of other creatures to subdue prospective hosts.

The final type of Xi'O was called a *Sentinel*. These Xi'O caused their hosts to grow thick, interlocking armour across their skin and greatly boosted their host's muscle mass. These Sentinels served largely as protectors of the hive.

Xi'O Queens, called *Brood-mothers*, kept their host in a near comatose state of minimal awareness while their Xi'O counterpart took full control of their agency. A Brood-mother host would be served food by Drones

until their bodies ballooned up and grew engorged, pulsing larval sacks that would burst over psionically docile hosts gathered beneath the Brood-mother to be infected by the Xi'O larvae that burst forth.

She continued to read to distract herself from how hungry she was but despite the grotesque descriptions, it did little to abate her hunger. Eventually, she found a passage about '*The Guardian of the West*' a massive statue of Tarkondrius. According to Eq'Perodinos, the statue was supposed to be near where she currently was. Since the book's publication, the sand sea had largely reclaimed the Guardian of the West. Even with a large chunk of the statue submerged beneath the sand, the Guardian of the West was staggeringly large. She sat in Tarkondrius' shadow and continued reading Eq'Perodinos until her hunger became too much.

When she rose, she thought it might have been a mirage or a hallucination of a tired and hungry mind but there appeared to be a large lake in the distance. As she stumbled nearer, she saw that the lake was indeed real but it was very obvious that the water level was far beneath what it had once been in the past.

There was a large obelisk poking out of the lake showing the water level where a drought had taken place in the distant past. There was an ominous, ancient warning that no one in the nearby settlement would be able to read chiselled into the stone of the obelisk in ancient A'ua'ki script:

**DESPAIR YE WHEN THESE WORDS APPEAR AND
KNOW FAMINE AND HUNGER ARE NEAR.**

She could tell there was something wrong as she entered the settlement. Guards were pacing the top of the walls but they didn't acknowledge Kerosi as she walked through the main gate. Instead, they were muttering to themselves anxiously while they shuffled back and forth above her. Some of the townsfolk were crawling on all fours in the dirt while others were rushing around erratically pulling at their hair and picking at their skin.

"The demons are coming," an Y'nari whispered to her when Kerosi came close enough. "Wait, who are you? Are *you* a demon?"

The Y'nari let out a shrill, terrified sound before sprinting away from her.

Two Y'nari stood at the well at the centre of the settlement arguing loudly. One struck the other and pushed them in. The Y'nari shrieked as they fell until Kerosi heard the wet, painful slap as they hit the water at the bottom.

The closer she came to the well, the stronger a puzzlingly sweet smell flooded her nostrils. Kerosi could sense there was something sickly hidden within the saccharine scent emanating from the well and kept her distance.

The wind was beginning to pick up and a painful

spray of gritty sand blasted against her cheeks.

“SAND DEMONS!” A voice cried.

A chorus of voices repeated the warning. Many Y’nari fled indoors while others buried their heads in their hands or curled themselves into a fetal position.

“SAND DEMONS!”

High-pitched, ghastly screams whistled along with the winds.

The screams became louder and louder and seemed to assault her from all directions. She cupped her hands over her ears and squinted her eyes in pain. She saw the shadows spill through the gates alongside the sandstorm. Kerosi rushed behind the nearest buildings and ducked down tight next to a rain barrel.

The shadows began looting the settlement and attacking guards. There was a loud, bright fireball that exploded out from one of the shadow’s hands and Kerosi shrieked. She covered her mouth and sunk down deeper behind the rain barrel. As the sand demons rushed around the settlement she realized that *they* were what was making that dark, terrifying whistling scream. More explosions popped off angrily as the frenzied citizens fled their burning homes.

The shrieking shadows had stopped flooding in from the front gate and were pressing further into the settlement. Kerosi slipped silently along the base of the city walls until she was able to escape undetected into the hazy winds of the sandstorm.

CHAPTER 26

THE ITCH WAS INSIDE HIS BANDAGED EYE SOCKET where he couldn't scratch it. The healer had looked him over when he arrived in Nesoq but was not able to save his eye. Ottek was told he was lucky the spike trap that had taken his eye had not been smeared with excrement as many of the other concealed traps had been. Otherwise, the resulting infection would have surely killed him as it had the others on their journey down the Crimson Coast from Tul through the contested lands to Nesoq.

Some of the traps had killed their victims instantly and their party were forced to leave the bodies behind. Ottek had heard the rumours of the guerrilla tactics the Aq'Adezeans had employed in past conflicts but nothing

could have prepared him for the terror that had waited for them in the jungle. Every step, every movement, every breath had the potential to trigger some kind of trap. It all but stalled their progress toward Nesoq.

One of the Imperium soldiers had dropped into a pit that had been covered with branches and ferns. The pit was two Y'nari tall and filled with sharpened wooden spikes. The momentum of the fall had pushed the spikes deep into the soldier's body. There was nothing they could do but listen to his pained cries for help until he bled out and fell silent. A Sen'Daris Er'Ebos scout had tripped a wire strung taught across the path which sent large boulders balanced precariously above them crashing down upon him; crushing his head, killing him instantly.

What should have been a single ossas journey became a tense senix-long trek through the jungle. They started with fourteen Y'nari when they departed Tul before they entered the contested lands and headed down the Crimson Coast but, by the time they arrived in Nesoq, only five remained.

He brought the bitter cup of pori to his mouth. He took in its spicy scent before knocking the fermented drink down his throat in one gulp. After four, his head was swimming mercifully away from the feelings of pain throbbing through his body. His injuries were numbed for the moment but he couldn't seem to get rid of that damned itching behind the wadded gauze in his

empty eye socket.

“Can I buy a hero a drink?”

An ur’ka sat down in the seat next to him at the bar. He blinked drunkenly at her with his one remaining eye. She was so strikingly beautiful that, at first, he thought she was making fun of him.

“Hero?” His eye watered while he continued to blink.

“You’re Ottek, right?” The ur’ka said.

“I am,” he replied cautiously.

“What are you drinking this Qi’Ar?”

“At the moment? Nothing,” he smirked.

“Let’s change that, shall we?”

The ur’ka flagged down the bartender from the other end of the bar and asked for two more pori.

“You’re a sweet ur’ka but I’m not interested in any company,” Ottek said.

“One drink,” she smiled.

He considered excusing himself to find sleep but it had been so long since he’d seen such an attractive ur’ka and even longer since one had shown interest.

“One drink,” he nodded.

She fawned over him and asked him questions about *‘being a war hero’*. One drink became two, which became three, and eventually, the pair ended up in Ottek’s rented room.

She shut the door behind her. A small table beneath an opened window held a bowl of fresh fruit. She plucked

the largest, juiciest of the bunch and held it to her.

“How did you lose your eye?”

He'd been fairly tipsy already when he'd first been approached by the pretty ur'ka in the bar. Now, he was drunk enough to have forgotten that he'd lost his eye.

He shuddered before shaking the anxious feeling from his body but was caught in the bloodied claws of his memories. The scent of death raked at the insides of his nose again as if he were physically back there in the jungle. The Imperium soldier in front of him had triggered a trap that released a heavy bundle of sharpened branches and U'tewsa shoots tied tightly together with thick ropes concealed in the canopy of trees overhead. The bundle of pointy spikes impaled the soldier in front of him and knocked Ottek clear across the path where he landed face down in a cleared patch of sharp U'tewsa shoots, which the Aq'Adezeans had harvested from to make the deadly trap.

Immediately, the remembered pain overpowered Ottek. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't even think. The pulsing, throbbing pain returned and the itching behind his empty socket joined by its side.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” the tone of the pretty ur'ka's voice shifted becoming colder, darker; sinister.

Ra'Quro reached out a glowing hand and placed it over Ottek's forehead. She scanned his mind violently for his meeting with the Vo'dis earlier that ossa. She heard their conversation through Ottek's memories.

His head was beginning to grow hot. The glow from Ra'Quro's hand was getting brighter. The voices were hazy and quiet at first and she had to scrub back again a few times through Ottek's memories to see all of the information clearly. Memories of Ottek's experience in the jungle kept inserting themselves while Ra'Quro attempted to focus on his meeting with the Vo'dis; forcing her to press deeper into Ottek's mind.

Ra'Quro not only saw the terrifying events in the jungle, she was *experiencing* how Ottek had lost his eye.

The hair on Ottek's head began to singe and smoke. Finally, she gleaned a direction for which to follow her contract, the Vo'dis Ka'Cyr. She released her hold on Ottek. His limp body fell to the ground, smoking and seizing.

A yewpip slashed at the moist, plump fruit in her hand and Ra'Quro shrieked and dropped it exploding against the aged wooden planks with a wet splat. The yewpip had crawled into Ottek's room through the opened window. It quickly clutched what remained of the fallen fruit in its tiny hands before scrambling out the window again. Fleeing into the darkness of Qi'Ar.

Ra'Quro cursed quietly while she found something to bandage the deep cuts the Yewpip had dug into her forearm. She cursed the yewpip and cursed herself for failing to pay attention to her surroundings.

CHAPTER 27

KEROSI WAS DELIGHTED TO FIND ONE of the books Ob'Ake had packed for her was a historical text written by the Immortal Historian himself, Pers'Is. There was an introductory chapter about ancient cartography with a gorgeous illustration of how Y'nari had once carved portable maps from driftwood in order to navigate coastal waters. These carvings represented coastlines in a continuous line; up one side of the driftwood and down the other.

After this introductory chapter, the Immortal Historian went on to claim that these ancient driftwood maps were proof that Y'nari had existed on Te'a for at least 200,000 Os. This tome, as were most of his writings, was deeply heretical. Kerosi had only heard

reference of this work through the Azai Grand Library. However, no one in positions of authority at the guild had ever taken such claims seriously. To her guild instructors, the Immortal Historian was a romanticized historical fiction like Av'Entos or the Xi'O. Serious historians believed the pre-historical period to have lasted 6,000 to 8,000 Os before the Green Wave and the introduction of the Ar'kon Calendar. More radical thinkers were willing to say 15,000 to 20,000 Os, but *all* agreed that the time-frame was far more condensed than the 200,000 Os the Immortal Historian had written about in the many volumes of forbidden history he'd authored.

Modern and ancient historians alike posited that the controversial historian was largely fictional or that his body of work was not that of a singular author but the product of many authors over a vast period. Pers'Is was called the Immortal Historian as works attributed to him had been found within ruins dating back to the pre-historical reign of the A'ua'ki and as current as to be found in libraries of the middle kingdom.

A small folded letter dropped out from between the pages of the book and landed at Kerosi's feet. She opened it gently. As she started reading, her eyes began to well up and her throat tightened.

My dearest Ob'Ake

Fate has chosen to part us. I could rage against its decision. I could burn the world down with my anger. Yet, none of these impassioned actions would afford us more time together but would instead siphon off the last few moments we have left to share. To spend what limited time we have left wallowing in resentment, anger, and regret would be the most egregious affront to our love I could imagine. Death does not cause me as much fear as the thought of squandering our final moments afforded to us. I choose instead to fill them with thankfulness for the memories we've shared. You have enriched my life, Ob'Ake. When I am gone, I want you to remember those memories of happiness and love that have brought so much joy to our lives. Focus on what we've built together and how we've helped each other grow into the wonderful beings we are. You will always be a part of me as I will always be a part of you. Do not look back in anger for what we've lost. Give thanks for the time fate afforded us. I love you, my dearest Ob'Ake.

Qera

Through tears, Kerosi folded the note back up and placed it safely back between the pages of the Immortal Historian's book. Kerosi continued to trudge through the sands as Mōt rose and fell behind her many times until she arrived at a city much smaller than Yubikot but somehow busier and more lively.

Y'nari were tightly packed together as they shuffled through the narrow streets past vendors and shops of the outer city. No one seemed to pay any attention to her as she slithered through the crowd. She heard the voices of vendors shouting out to potential customers as to why theirs was the shop they should patronize. There were posters at regular intervals promoting the autumn festival, Kin'ji.

She reached the edge of the market and emerged from the sea of bodies to see the tents of a refugee camp pressed against the city walls. Her mind shot back to her time at Ek'tomok and she found her breath was coming in shorter, faster bursts; her heart rate spiking.

Bokis.

She turned away from the tents and back to the crowd where she saw Azai horns. She blinked disbelievingly and rubbed her eyes before looking again. Many Azai were among the crowd of Sun'Ynarr.

She raced toward the nearest Azai but when she tried to talk to him, he averted his eyes and disappeared into the sea of Y'nari. She tried two more times with the same result before she noticed that every Azai was

wearing the same outfit. Each had their hair cut short to their scalp.

And then she saw Tela.

Tears were freely streaming down Kerosi's face as she rushed towards her friend.

"Tela!" She wrapped her arms around her friend who immediately became rigid and still. "Tela! Where have you been? How did you escape?"

She released Tela from her tight hug. When she looked into her face, Kerosi found Tela would not meet her eyes.

"Tela," Kerosi said gently. "What's the matter? Are you okay?"

She was silent and started to pull away.

"Tela!" Kerosi gripped her arm and Tela winced.

Beneath her hand, Kerosi could feel the ridges of scabs on Tela's forearm.

The number 482 was carved deep into her skin. The back of her hand had been branded with the symbol of some Aq'Adezean aristocratic family. She was missing two fingers on her hand. It appeared as though they were very recently removed and hastily cauterized. The skin around her missing digits were still swollen and red.

"Gods," Kerosi gasped. "Who did this to you, Tela?"

"Take your filthy hands off my daloqi!" A sour, pompous voice barked behind her.

When she turned she saw an immaculate Sun'Ynarr

with ostentatious robes adorned with a fortune of bracelets and rings.

“Back you foul thing!” He swatted at Kerosi’s head with the black and gold fan he was waving in his dainty hand.

“Stop that,” Kerosi glowered at him.

“You dare address me?” The Y’nari scoffed before turning away from Kerosi and screaming out for a city guard to come to his aid.

“Tela, we’re leaving,” Kerosi took Tela’s arm again, this time more gently.

She still wouldn’t meet Kerosi’s eyes.

“You will not!” The pompous Y’nari snarled. “Guards! This miserable urchin is trying to steal my daloqi! Guards!”

Tela pulled her arm from Kerosi’s grasp and moved to the wealthy Y’nari’s side.

“See?” The Y’nari said. “482 belongs to me.”

“Tela,” Kerosi pleaded. “What happened to you? You don’t have to be afraid anymore. I’m here.”

Finally, Tela looked meekly up from the ground and their eyes met.

“Come, 482!” The Y’nari yanked hard on Tela’s arm. “We’re leaving.”

“Tela,” Kerosi said again. “Bokis wanted you to know that he loved you. He loved you so much that instead of running away together and having a life of hardship on the mainland, he wanted you to live in

prosperity in Qisaq. That is why he didn't leave with you."

"He said that?"

"Shut your mouth!" The Y'nari struck Tela hard across her face. "You will *not* speak in my presence."

Kerosi shrieked and launched herself toward the Y'nari who kicked her hard in the chest before she could get too close sending Kerosi crashing into the sand.

"No!" Tela screamed. "No! I will not be silent you evil, vile monster!"

The Y'nari sighed. "You broke 482. I spent so long domesticating and training this beast and you broke it with a single conversation. I have no use for such a fragile daloqi."

The Y'nari pulled a dagger from his robes and stabbed Tela repeatedly in the chest and neck. Tela gurgled in phlegmy surprise before collapsing into the sand and lying still.

The Y'nari turned away from her. Kerosi's rage took over. She gripped the nearest rock tightly in her hand and leapt onto the Y'nari's back, shrieking and wailing in hysterical fury. She struck the Y'nari in the head again and again knocking him prone. With each furious strike of the rock, the noble's skull caved further and further into itself until it became a wet, gory paste.

Around her, angry voices were charged and panicked; others were enthusiastically calling out for violence. The Azai refugees, Aq'Adezean poor, and

emboldened daloqi had banded together to take on the nobility dotted throughout the crowd pulling them into the sand and beating them to death with rocks, sticks, and anything that could be improvised into a weapon.

It took Kerosi a moment to realize that the crowd was chanting her name as she continued smashing the rock into what remained of the long-dead Y'nari's skull.

"Kerosi! Kerosi! Kerosi!"

City guards eventually came in to suppress the chaos and Kerosi felt many hands pulling her to her feet. She dazedly followed where the hands led her and was funnelled out of the city. The hands belonged to Y'nari who said that they were part of a rebellion against the Aq'Adezeans. They expressed how they could use someone like her.

Things felt unreal to Kerosi. She was moving but at the same time felt like she was stationary and far away. Or nowhere at all. Voices were speaking to her but they were just sounds to her as she could glean no meaning within their noise.

"They all need to die," she found herself whispering.

"I think there's a profound truth at the centre of that," one of the voices said to her but she didn't acknowledge it.

An Y'nari thrust Qera's backpack into her hands along with a blue amulet in the shape of an eye.

"So that all A'ji will know you are a friend of the resistance".

CHILDREN
OF THE
CRIMSON
INSURRECTION
PART II

CHAPTER 28

HE WASN'T YET DEAD but his skin was charred black and rigid. When Ka'Cyr tried to lift him, she could hear Destim's brittle, taught skin cracking and splitting revealing the wet, pink flesh beneath. She frantically called over the young soldiers who arrived too late to catch the assassin nor any of the Sansarcs who'd scattered into the dunes surrounding the ruins joyously celebrating the destruction of her staff.

They re-purposed one of their tents to form a kind of stretcher that they used to transport what remained of Destim to the nearest settlement. Her new navigator, Eqloss, explained their detour would take them significantly away from their intended path.

The settlement was too small for protective walls yet populated enough that they would find shelter and limited medical help for Destim. The settlement was isolated enough that those who greeted them did not seem to know about the Tulean invasion or that they belonged to the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos. Without her helmet or the majority of the distinctive armour of her order, they assumed Ka'Cyr and her entourage were simply traveling merchants from the west.

Ka'Cyr didn't correct them.

The settlement (the locals were calling it Nostik) was ill-equipped to treat Destim's extensive injuries. The healer simply presented him a bowl of anesthetic liquid made from boiled water and an medicinal herb paste. They then began rubbing Destim's charred skin with an ineffectual salve but quickly stopped when large black flakes of burnt skin snapped off at their touch.

Destim was still breathing shallowly but Ka'Cyr recognized he was beyond help. He would soon die and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. She squeezed his hand as gently as she could but felt the sickening crunch beneath her fingers as dark scales of dead skin fell away revealing Destim's raw, moist skin.

Destim's face was horrifically scorched and his eyes burnt shut. His had been the first kind eyes she'd seen when she'd been rescued by the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos as a child. Much of those memories were clouded and

ethereal to the point that she could not be sure which events had truly happened and which were imagined. Destim's eyes, though, were a moment she remembered with striking and immutable clarity.

Destim had been the Grokix assigned to Vo'dis Yaolin during the raid that had liberated Ka'Cyr from the control of the monks who'd held her captive. Despite his rank and importance, Destim had taken a personal interest in Ka'Cyr's safety and well-being. He would check in on her regularly as Ka'Cyr eventually settled into her new life at the Mor'dari Academy in Western Tul.

As well, Destim had been instrumental in the selection process for Ka'Cyr's assignment serving under Vo'dis Yaolin once she'd graduated and then again when Ka'Cyr had taken the mantle of Vo'dis from Yaolin after his death.

She'd only been a Vo'dis a short while yet in that time she had lost the majority of her ceremonial armour and an ancient, irreplaceable Sen'Daris Er'Ebos staff. Soon, she would lose Destim too. She was constantly aware that she'd most likely caused a diplomatic incident between their Imperium allies and her Order during her very first official interaction as a Vo'dis. To top it off, Ka'Cyr was not any closer to uncovering the identity of the assassin (or assassins) murdering Grokix throughout Asmita.

"I'm a failure, Destim," she whispered hoarsely.

“How can I do this alone?”

“*T-the . . . t-toni- . . . tonic-*“ Destim’s cracked, wheezy voice stuttered. “*Yo-your p-power . . . don’t l-let it consu-consume y-you . . . I’m . . . I’m* sorry little one.”

He exhaled deeply and became still.

Ka’Cyr shrieked and sobbed and threw the bowl of liquid anesthetic to the ground. She stomped out into the cool Qi’Ar and screamed into the sky. The young soldiers watched her silently as she raged.

Her heart raced faster and faster as the realization of her utter isolation spiked within her mind. The young soldiers were looking to her for guidance but Ka’Cyr was panicking. Destim’s calm voice appeared in her frantic thoughts and reminded her of her duty in the gentle but stern way he would have.

She stood upright and adjusted her posture before turning to the young soldiers and demanding an update. They blinked confusedly at her and Ka’Cyr singled out the navigator and asked him how they would get back on their planned path. He stammered and awkwardly unfolded a dusty map.

“Nostik is here,” Eqloss pointed. “And the ruins were over here. We can either take this ridge to the northeast and connect back up with the road here on the other side of the jungle or we can go west back into the dunes and go around the ridge-“

A local had overheard them and quickly advised them against taking the proposed route through the

jungle. He spoke of horrific monsters that lived within spiked trees. Ka'Cyr thanked him for his input and waited for the old Y'nari to leave before continuing.

"If we take the jungle route we can save an ossa," Eqloss said. "If we go back out into the Meriko sand sea we'll have to back-track west and-"

"And what?"

"In our rush to bring Grokix Destim here, we left behind many of the provisions," one of the other soldiers, Beqit, swallowed hard.

"You WHAT?!" Ka'Cyr barked and slammed a fist down hard against the table.

The young soldiers flinched.

"How could you leave behind provisions?" She shrieked. "What did we leave behind?"

"Most of our water," another soldier, Rin, said meekly.

She glowered at the young soldiers.

They stayed in Nostik that Qi'Ar. Ka'Cyr woke them the moment Mōt pierced the horizon. She ordered the soldiers to carry Destim for burial a ways outside the settlement on a ridge overlooking the dunes where the ground was solid enough. They spent a long while digging with their hands and daggers before gently laying Destim into the grave.

None of the young soldiers said anything. Ka'Cyr stared long at the shrivelled, black body of her mentor.

There was an odd squelching sound coming from

the bushes a ways back from the ridge and then they heard voices mumbling.

“Chaos is illimitable,” a louder voice said.

<<since there is nothing before it to limit it>>

Many scattered voices sounded out in response.

“Chaos is unfathomable,” the voice said again.

<<since there is nothing before it to fathom it>>

The eerie chorus of voices replied.

“Chaos is immeasurable.”

<<since there is nothing before it to measure it>>

“Chaos is invisible.”

<<since nothing before it can witness it>>

Slowly, a multitude of figures began shuffling out from the trees.

“Chaos is unending.”

<<since Chaos exists eternally>>

As they neared, Ka’Cyr could make out the figures were wearing dark red robes emblazoned with a symbol of the god of chaos.

“Praise be to the god of Chaos!”

There was something wrong about the way the robed figures moved and swayed as they slowly crept closer.

The closer they came, the more detail Ka’Cyr could make out in the dim light. The robes seemed to fuse where skin met fabric.

“They’re Obloxos!” Ka’Cyr realized.

These eerie blob creatures absorbed their victims’

bodies, digested them, and took their form. It was said Obloxos could even siphon the memories of their victims to replicate intricately credible copies with which to lure further victims. These Obloxos impersonations were identical to the original victims save for a faint scent of sickly sweet bile. As Obloxos primarily preyed on animals, they had difficulties replicating the look of fabric for clothing. The imitations could not realistically create the movement of fabric as it was simply more of the same blob substance of the Obloxos.

It must've been quite a long time since the Obloxos had last fed as the images of the robed Y'nari copies were heavily degraded; facial features looked blurred and inconsistent.

"Stay back!" Rin screamed and the party turned in unison to see one of the robed impersonations, mid-transformation, melting into a roiling blob that enveloped the terrified soldier.

The now transparent Obloxos encircled Rin completely. Ka'Cyr and the others could only watch as Rin's skin and muscles were grotesquely eaten away. The Obloxos pulsed, gurgled, and shifted; reforming itself into a perfect impersonation of Rin. It began calling out to them for help in Rin's voice. The many, slow moving segments of the Obloxos were blocking the road leading west back into the Meriko sand sea. The party hastily snatched up the few supplies they still had and rushed off down the east road leading into the jungle.

CHAPTER 29

T*ERROR.*
Every sound was too loud.
Silence was too quiet.
Everything was too much.

Sa'tomi and the procession of refugees were slowly dragging themselves along the road toward Korsik. The Ezar attack had horrifically thinned out their numbers and the survivors were shambling along in a dazed and disoriented stupor. Even Evoq who'd constantly been reading loudly from his Oglisa was silently trodding along the overgrown dirt road in sombre silence. They stopped twice to rest but at Qi'Ar no one slept.

Half-way through the next ossa, they arrived at the outskirts of Korsik.

There was a crowd bustling about outside the city walls taking in the autumn festival: Kin'ji. Tul celebrated Kin'ji as well and Sa'tomi remembered it fondly. Then, the thought of his tortured family writhing on stakes assaulted his thoughts and he had to physically jerk them away.

"We're here," Evoq said tiredly.

"There's so many Y'nari," a soft voice said.

"They look happy," a refugee said flatly.

"I'd completely forgotten it was time again for the Kin'ji festival," an elderly Y'nari smiled weakly.

A wave of nostalgia mercilessly crashed over Sa'tomi forcing him to sit down. The last time he'd celebrated the Kin'ji festival he'd still been staying on his family's estate in Tul preoccupied with the asinine affluence of his nobility. His sister had made Mōtiziḡ cookies with the red icing designed in concentric circles signifying the shrinking of Mōt in the sky and the beginning of the cooling season. He could almost taste the sweet, buttery flakiness of the Mōtiziḡ on his tongue.

He forced himself to stand up but his knees were shaky and his head was swimming.

"Move," a snarling voice exclaimed the same instant the noble shoved Sa'tomi off-balance.

Sa'tomi landed on his hands, scraping the beds of his palms on the grit of the festival grounds. He glowered up at the noble who had already moved deeper into the crowd. The regally dressed noble was followed

close behind by two slaves carrying armfuls of Kin'ji trinkets and pastries while they meekly stared at their feet.

His nostalgia fell away and rage rushed in to take its place. Sa'tomi rose from the ground and started stomping toward the noble but Evoq stepped in between and shook his head gently.

"We have no control over the actions of others," Evoq said. "We can, however, control our responses."

Sa'tomi looked into Evoq's eyes and realized the spiritual leader still believed Sa'tomi was a contested lands refugee and not the troubled soldier capable of vicious brutality. Remnants of dark emotions left behind by the Imperium chew were urging him to chase the noble down and pound his head into a paste.

Evoq shook his head again and directed Sa'tomi to rejoin the other refugees.

Voices began shrieking in vociferous agitation and the whole crowd hummed with a charged anxiety that Sa'tomi could feel against his skin. He couldn't see what was going on but there was some kind of altercation deeper into the sea of festival goers.

"Kerosi! Kerosi! Kerosi!"

The crowd was incensed and volatile as they chanted the name of someone Sa'tomi did not know.

All around him, Y'nari were starting to attack the nobility dotted throughout the crowd. They were using rocks, sticks, and even festival signs to attack

the surprised nobles. Anything that could be used as a weapon was employed to kill the nobles.

Sa'tomi blinked numbly at the violence unfolding. He saw a perfect rock at his feet and thought about joining the melee but, before he could make a decision, soldiers appeared pouring through the city gates. They began striking the rioters with batons and shields.

Evoq instructed the refugees to sit on the ground and raise their hands in the air.

"We are not involved with this?" Evoq said but a soldier struck him across the face with his baton regardless.

Internally, Sa'tomi ached to tackle the soldier but instead rushed to Evoq to see to his injury.

Shortly afterward, the soldiers succeeded in subduing the riot. They rounded up everyone on the festival grounds to begin sorting them out. The surviving nobles were escorted from the Kin'ji grounds while the slaves, the peasantry, and the refugees were marched to the holding cells inside Korsik.

It was cramped and hot.

"Are you okay, Evoq?" Sa'tomi's dry, thirsty voice cracked.

Evoq was squinting in pain and clearly disoriented.

"Why didn't they just kill us?" Sa'tomi wondered.

"Oh, I think they still plan to," a voice replied. "They just want it to be as visible as possible. They'll want to make examples of us."

“There is no *us*. We were just there,” Sa’tomi explained.

“They won’t care,” the voice spoke again.

“We meant no harm,” one of the refugees said. “We came here escape the Imperium. We’re peaceful.”

“You can’t truly call yourself peaceful unless you’re capable of great violence,” Sa’tomi said. “If you are not capable of such violence you are harmless not peaceful. That’s an important distinction.”

“I think there’s a profound truth at the centre of that,” the stranger beside Sa’tomi said. “You strike me as a very peaceful Y’nari.”

The stranger came closer and Sa’tomi tried to take a step back but the jail cells were cramped and he stayed where he was. There was standing room only in the cells as the benches lining the bars were given to elderly and the injured.

The stranger looked him over. His gaze made Sa’tomi uncomfortable.

“Iblik,” the Y’nari said, extending an awkward hand to Sa’tomi amid the bodies pressed together within the crowded jail cell.

“I’m . . .” Sa’tomi hesitated. “I was injured on the way here and I don’t remember much before Evoq found me.”

Evoq dazedly perked up at the sound of his name and rose to his feet.

“He was battling a fever and talking about ghosts

and demons when we'd found him," Evoq said.

"From your horns, I would expect you came from somewhere in the contested lands," Iblik said with a smile.

Iblik's own horns were covered by a traditional Kin'ji hat.

"So they tell me," Sa'tomi said.

"The mind tends to retreat when faced with the barbarity of war," Iblik said. "Maybe you're better off without the knowledge of what came before."

"Whose this Kerosi?" Evoq asked.

"I was hoping one of you knew," Iblik said. "Others seemed to or else they wouldn't have been chanting her name."

"I know her," a voice called from within the sea of Y'nari. "I know her! I lived in the same Be'narri. She was two floors above me."

As the Y'nari pushed through the others to join them, they saw he was wearing the clothes of a slave. He had a collection of scars on his arms, neck, and chest; some healed, others rather fresh. There were three digits carved into his forearm.

641

"It seemed like many Y'nari knew her," Iblik said.

"She was very influential on the island," 641 said.

"She was?" Iblik said, amused. "How so?"

"Not only was she was a scribe at the Azai Grand Library," 641 started. "She and Tela organized *the*

Esaikilix for our Be'narri."

"And that is?" Iblik asked.

"*The Esaikilix* is only the biggest event outside of the joining festival!"

641's jovial demeanor was jarring and off-putting and it was showing on Sa'tomi's face. Iblik noticed and smirked.

"What happened?" Sa'tomi asked after adjusting his face.

"Why were they chanting her name?" Iblik asked.

"You didn't see?" 641 seemed very surprised.

Iblik and Sa'tomi shook their heads.

"Somehow, Kerosi wasn't a slave like the rest of us," 641 said. "She was just *here* at the festival grounds. From what I gather, she was trying to free Tela from her Sun'Ynarr master but he killed her."

"Kerosi?" Sa'tomi asked.

"No, Tela. Her friend," 641 clarified. "After he killed Tela, Kerosi went into a frenzy and crushed the slaver's skull with a rock. It set everyone else off and . . ." he gestured to the crowded jail cell.

"Ah, so Kerosi was the catalyst that sparked the riot," Iblik said. "She's done more for the A'ji than thousands of pamphlets could ever achieve."

"The A'ji?" Evoq perked up again. "Are you with the A'ji?"

Iblik shushed the injured spiritual leader gently before subtly nodding.

Outside, the wind was beginning to howl and spit sand against the porous stone bricks framing the barred windows of the jail. Within the sounds of the approaching sandstorm, a dark symphony of terrifying, discordant whistling was growing in intensity.

“Ah,” Iblik smiled. “Our salvation has arrived.”

CHAPTER 30

RA'QURO GINGERLY ITCHED THE RAISED scabs on her forearm from the yewpip attack just hard enough to temporarily alleviate the irritation without opening the wounds again. The refraction of the heat rising from the dunes made the horizon appear to wave and sway in the distance. The cloth wrapped around her sandals, ankles, and calves protected what her long traveling robes could not. Yet still, she felt the heat of the sand radiating angrily through the thin fabric. Normally, her previous contracts had kept her near urban centres or well-travelled trade routes, which offered many places to conceal oneself among the varied environments.

Among the dunes, she felt naked and exposed.

She'd followed the stolen memories she'd pilfered from the one-eyed officer, Ottek, through the Qi'Ar and into the next ossa. Eventually, she came upon ruins piercing the gritty skin of the dunes. She instantly recognized the signs of a violent struggle. A glint of light flashed across Ra'Quro's face revealing the location of Vo'dis Ka'Cyr's grotesque Sen'Daris Er'Ebos helmet half buried in the sand a ways in front of her.

Behind her, a rapidly constructed encampment had been just as hastily deserted. An alarming amount of provisions for which an expedition would need should they hope to cross the sand sea alive lay baking in the hot light of Mōt. Leading away from the camp were tracks that Ra'Quro followed to a small village called Nostik. She learned a group matching the description of Ka'Cyr and her entourage had stayed at the Inn but were there no longer. She ate at the local tavern and rested as much as she could before resuming her search for Ka'Cyr.

A ways out from Nostik, Ra'Quro came across a group of Obloxos whom she cautiously observed, unnoticed, from a distance. Most of the creatures were aged and degraded but one of the Obloxos impersonations shambling about looked as though it had only recently been formed. The impersonation, too, matched the description of someone belonging to Vo'dis Ka'Cyr's expedition.

There was a newly dug grave at the intersection of

roads branching off into the dunes in one direction and the thick foliage of the jungle down the other. From the frantic footprints, it looked like Ka'Cyr and her party had chosen to venture into the jungle.

CHAPTER 31

KEROSI HAD STUMBLED THROUGH the desert, sobbing. The bright, fiery grief raked furious fingers across her tattered heart.

Bokis.

Ob'Ake.

And now Tela.

Their loss was lighting her soul ablaze.

She wasn't the least bit remorseful over the violent death of the noble who'd taken Tela's life. In fact, she found herself wishing she could've stretched that moment out. To savor it fully. Part of herself longed to kill him all over again. It had happened so fast. Too fast. She grieved the fleeting experience of her limited vengeance while she replayed the moment again and

again in her mind.

Eventually, she stopped shambling and collapsed to her knees; panting, sweating and crying. Grief and rage crumpled into fatigue, hunger, and fear.

In your fear, speak only peace.

The words of Grix entered her mind.

It was a mantra that *the Shipmaster* had repeatedly spoken to those who'd followed him as they fled across the Crimson Coast.

Caution is natural. Useful. Fear, however, is the thief of agency. Fear is immobilizing. Fear is crippling. Peace and the awareness of ones own agency is the way forward.

His philosophy of peace through a singular, purposeful awareness was what birthed the idea of *the Crimson Fleet*. It ultimately secured their method of escape and eventual founding of the Azai Kingdom on the island chain south of the mainland.

Kerosi tried to purge her mind of her fear and her dark memories, focusing instead on the sensations surging through her body. She felt the bright heat of the sand against her clothbound feet. She felt the frantic in and out of her breathing, which she consciously tried to slow and even out; long and balanced.

Once she'd gotten her breathing under control, she scanned her body for more sensations. Her mind buzzed angrily like a violently disturbed insect hive. She pulled the feeling down, elongating it across her

body; deluding it. The buzzing faded away slowly and in its place she felt the aching of her tight muscles. Her legs burned and her shoulders were tight against her ears. She actively pushed her shoulders down and pressed her chest out slightly.

She spent awhile breathing in and out slowly until her shoulders remained where they were without her willing them to relax. She rubbed each shoulder awkwardly with the opposite hand. She could feel the thick, firm knots in her shoulder muscles and found herself struck solidly by a memory of her privileged life on the island. She'd had access to physical healers who would massage her with expensive oils and exotic fragrances whenever she'd been 'tense'. Thinking of it now, she almost laughed. Such things that had once made her feel tense now seemed so quaint and unimportant when contrasted against her currently reality.

She resumed walking slowly and made it to the top of the next dune before collapsing. When she mentally scanned her body again, she observed the weakness in her muscles and the emptiness of her stomach. She'd seen a few creatures scrambling across the surface of the sand but they were fast and small. Not much of a meal. Even if she could catch one, she had no idea how to prepare it.

Back on the island, Kerosi and Tela had specialized in food preparation. They'd even organized the annual *Esaikilix* together for their Be'narri; baking and cooking

for hundreds of attendees. She and Tela and taken in-depth food safety and preparation courses to become qualified food preparers. They weren't, however, taught how to hunt animals or how to grow and harvest the ingredients for meals.

Only how to prepare it.

Most goods (especially meat) were brought onto the island through the marina and distributed across the Kingdom from there. Memories of Tela came down like fists upon her head and Kerosi began to cry again.

She heard distant voices and the rhythmic thumping of large animals clomping across the sands. She threw herself to the ground and her whole body snapped back into tense hyper-vigilance.

She slowly crawled to the crest of the dune and gingerly peeked over the sands. A small caravan passed below consisting of two large sand sleds pulled by two teams of nun'bak behind a procession of a dozen or so Y'nari. She followed, undetected, sneaking from dune to dune at the rear of the caravan until the sands gradually became more solid and gave way to the grassy plains marking the edge of the Meriko sand sea. The caravan stopped once Mōt had set. As the travellers made camp, some of them began preparing food over a fire. Even from a distance, Kerosi could smell the alluring scent of roasting meat and her stomach pleaded with her angrily for sustenance.

The travellers didn't seem like a Tulean military

outfit, nor did they look Aq'Adezean. They didn't seem overtly menacing though she wasn't willing to see them as friendly yet. She waited until the majority of the travellers had retired to their small tents to rest before venturing closer to the camp. She'd wanted to wait until they were all asleep before entering camp. However, there were two Y'nari sitting around the fire who did not show signs of tiredness and were instead conversing boisterously together. One more so than the other. Their voices masked Kerosi's cautious entrance into camp.

She peered into each of the sleds to check their contents, careful not to wake the snoring teams of nun'bak that were still harnessed to them. There were pickaxes and shovels but no weapons that she could see. There were bundles of old scrolls and leather maps. Tight, neat stacks of rations in burlap sacks were tied taught next to small barrels of what Kerosi assumed contained water and wine.

The two at the camp fire still had not noticed Kerosi's entrance.

She could smell the scent of cured meat and the pungent musk of cheese wafting out from the burlap sacks. She crawled into the first sled and began to untie one of the sacks.

"Thief!" A voice yelled the same instant the Y'nari gripped her wrist and yanked her out of the sled.

The two Y'nari shot up from their seats around the

fire. Tents burst alive with frantic agitation and their occupants dazedly spilled out in the cool desert Qi'Ar.

"What is this about?" One of the ur'ka stepped forward.

She had been one of the two who'd stayed awake chatting loudly by the fire. In fact, she'd been the louder of the pair.

"This little one was trying to steal from us?" The gruff Y'nari said as he squeezed Kerosi's wrist a little tighter.

The second quieter ur'ka from the fire was now silently scanning Kerosi.

"Release her," the louder ur'ka said finally.

"What?" The Pod'ka gripping Kerosi's arm protested.

"You heard her, Enik," the quieter ur'ka looked sternly over at him until he relaxed his grip on Kerosi's wrist.

Kerosi pulled her sore wrist tightly to her chest. She took a few cautious steps backward until her hips hit the sand sled behind her.

"We're a ways from the Crimson Coast, little Toshida. Are you lost?"

Kerosi couldn't tell if the ur'ka was being sincere or if they knew she was not a Toshida at all.

"What did you hope to find in our sled?"

"I'm looking for food," Kerosi said meekly and turned her eyes to the ground.

“Well then,” the ur’ka reached into the sled and opened the burlap bag wide.

She pulled out a rectangular ration.

“Have some *towo*,” the ur’ka smiled as she handed the ration to Kerosi.

Towo was made of dried meat and various grains, which were then ground into a powder and mixed with honey, melted animal fat, and select herbs and berries. The mixture was then pressed into a rectangular mould and baked.

Kerosi devoured the towo in a few bites.

Initially, Enik protested but was silenced by a raised palm from the quieter ur’ka.

“Soon we’ll be in Bans and we have more than enough supplies to reach our destination that we can share with this traveller,” the quieter ur’ka said.

“Would you like to join us by the fire?” The other ur’ka extended a hand to her.

She could still smell the flame-kissed meat as they approached the campfire and hoped the travellers would share some with her as well.

CHAPTER 32

KA'CYR WAS ACUTELY AWARE of her heightened energy levels as she trudged through the thick jungle a great ways ahead of the young soldiers who clomped exhaustedly behind her. She'd lost much of her Vo'dis plate armor during her journey (her helmet and one of her heavy, dark pauldrons, among other pieces) and so was that much lighter. However, Ka'Cyr knew her lack of encumbrance was not the source of the intense energy she suddenly found herself imbued with. Part of her worried this charged feeling could dissipate at any moment leaving her limp and exhausted. She set the rapid pace of their trek through the dense foliage of the jungle hoping her manic energy would hold out until they passed through entirely and could resume

along the prior path the expedition had set.

It was beginning to get dark and, when Ka'Cyr glanced over her shoulder with the missing pauldron, she saw just how far the young recruits had fallen behind her.

Anger flooded into her blood and the emotion almost knocked her over. The intense feeling of it gave her pause and she took a few breaths to placate her rage while the stragglers caught up.

"You're all moving too slowly," she hissed.

They were all panting and sweating through their much lighter leather armour.

"We've no more water," one of them said.

She realized she didn't remember the soldier's name and she squinted angrily at him.

"It's getting dark," Eqloss, the navigator, said. "We won't reach the other edge of the jungle before Qi'Ar. We should make camp, look for water, and start a fire."

Ka'Cyr gritted her teeth.

"You think so, do you?"

Eqloss nodded quietly as the other soldiers had taken this opportunity to lean against trees, rest on their knees, or sit on large, moss-covered boulders obscured by the leaves of fat ferns that grew along the jungle floor.

She silently scanned the exhausted soldiers with an annoyed expression only Eqloss saw.

“Very well,” she rolled her eyes in defeat.

The soldiers made their camp within a clearing next to a small stream. One of the soldiers tested the water to make sure it was drinkable and they took turns replenishing the few water skins they still had with them.

All along the clearing there were large mounds covered with an orange and brown substance that looked almost like fur or very coarse hair.

While the soldiers made a fire, Ka’Cyr was noticing that her emotions were markedly more visceral. She could feel the volatile energy continuing to swell and engorge within her.

As the light faded, she found she could still see a great deal of the jungle before her. All of her senses seemed heightened. Beneficial and detrimental alike.

The restlessness and agitation she felt climaxed and she shot up and began pacing.

“I need to go for a walk,” she said finally.

“One of us should go with you,” Eqloss said stepping away from the others who were constructing the last of the tents.

“That will be unnecessary,” Ka’Cyr stepped into the darkness before Eqloss or the others could follow.

She was silently amazed at the clarity with which she could still see the jungle through the darkness. She could make out the droplets of condensation on the wide leaves of the ferns at her knees. She was aware

of the movement of all the insects that skittered about the bark of the trees she passed. She could sense them all. It was almost like the feeling of using her old staff. Before any discharge, she could feel the energy building between her and the staff. Only now, she was sensing that energy radiating out from everything around her. It was an almost overwhelmingly euphoric sensation that ignited a tickle, which buzzed and crackled through her.

She laughed.

She heard the snapping of twigs behind her and she shot around to find she was quite a ways from camp. She could still make out the flickering orange light bleeding through the spaces between the trees. Her stomach interrupted to reminded her how long it had been since she'd eaten. She turned and started back to the fire.

Ka'Cyr almost impaled herself on one of the many thick, sharp spikes that protruded from the trees lining the path she'd cut on her short walk.

Then she remembered the local's warning.

She began scanning the trees. Had she not been, the assassin's blade would have entered the back of her head. She saw the glint of the blade with enough time to strike the weapon away with the back of her metal vambrace, launching it harmlessly into the darkness.

Ka'Cyr screamed and instinctively lifted her other arm to cast a restraining spell against the attacker.

There was a brief moment where she realized that she was missing her staff, but regardless, she was somehow able to hold the would-be assassin in the air before her.

“Who are you?” Ka’Cyr barked.

The ur’ka in black leather clothes struggled furiously against Ka’Cyr’s power but refused to answer her.

“A Voleki?” Ka’Cyr whispered as she realized the implications. “Who hired you, *Shadow*?”

One of the soldiers at camp screamed painfully. She heard the violent snarling of some enormous creature. More screams joined the chaotic symphony of terrified voices that crescendoed with the cries of a soldier who was flung through the branches of the trees toward her. Ka’Cyr ducked as the soldier struck the tree beside her at a tremendous speed forcing the thick spikes of the dark trees through the soldier’s leather armor and out the other side. The impaled soldier thrashed agonizingly against the spikes but remained firmly pressed against the tree.

The surprise broke her concentration and the voleki dropped from within Ka’Cyr’s magical grasp landing among the ferns.

A large creature with orange and brown fur emerged from the darkness. It was pulled along by two long tentacles that curled around branches as it swung ominously slowly from tree to tree. The creature had a huge toothy maw that took up most of its mass. Dangling

behind the creature as it swung toward the impaled soldier were two smaller arms that ended in enormous hands. Each with eight spindly digits.

“Aqlut!” Ra’Quro gasped from her place among the ferns.

Ka’Cyr had sensed something from the orange and brown furred mounds earlier and cursed herself for having dismissed the feeling. She had only vaguely heard of Aqlut before. This was the first time she’d been far enough east to ever come in contact with the creatures in the wild.

Aqlut had a symbiotic relationship with the barbed Ranmatt trees that surrounded their camp. By themselves, Aqlut were not maneuverable or agile. Their massive jaws were slow to open. These disadvantages caused Aqlut to congregate around Ranmatt trees so as to impale their prey upon the trees’ spikes. However, once an Aqlut’s enormous mouth was fully opened, thick jaw muscles allowed the Aqlut’s toothy maw to snap shut with terrifying force.

Ra’Quro watched the Aqlut as its tentacles pulled itself level with the impaled soldier squirming against the spikes jutting out from the Ranmatt tree. The mouth of the Aqlut shook and shuddered as it slowly opened as though the strain was almost too much for the creature. As its mouth opened, Ra’Quro could see the many rows of jagged, yellowed teeth that filled its wet, menacing throat. The mouth remained opened

as wide as was possible before it began shaking with fatigue-like spasms.

Ra'Quro realized she was holding her breath.

The Aqlut snapped down hard severing the soldier's body in two. The more articulated hands at the end of the Aqlut's bottom two arms twitched their gangly digits to dislodge the largest pieces of what remained of the soldier's legs and pelvis that had become stuck amongst the rows of sinister teeth before tossing the tattered meat deeper into its throat. The top half of the soldier continued to scream as blood emptied from the tattered torso suspended by the black Ranmatt spikes above the jungle floor.

Ka'Cyr rushed back to the camp and saw the remaining soldiers trying to fight back four Aqlut who'd rolled into the shifting light of the campfire. The front two Aqlut had their tentacles out, slowly swatting at the soldiers who slashed at their long, thick appendages with their short, ineffective swords. The other two Aqlut looked unassuming, almost harmless, like docile balls of orange and brown fur despite their massive size. Had Ka'Cyr not witnessed the phlegmy, toothy throat of the creatures herself, she realized how easily one could overlook the dangerousness of the Aqlut.

Another of the soldiers was launched into the air narrowly missing Ka'Cyr before smashing hard against the trunk of the nearest Ranmatt tree, embedding the spikes deep into his body.

Anger, fear, grief, desperation and every other emotion she could have felt in that moment surged through her. Escaping her body in a vociferous shriek that shook the canopy of trees above her. She thrust both of her arms forward, only vaguely aware that she was holding a flame spell in her mind. Despite not possessing her Sen'Daris Er'Ebos staff as a conduit to focus her powers, the flames shot out from her open hands and immediately engulfed the nearest Aqlut sending it wailing and hissing as it rolled into the protection of the trees but only served to set the jungle around them ablaze.

Eqloss brought an uncoordinated barrage of sword strikes down upon the Aqlut's tentacles but never seemed to make more than a few shallow lacerations. Most of his attacks were parried harmlessly away.

Ka'Cyr heard the Voleki down the path behind her scream. An Aqlut had slammed the assassin against one of Ranmatt trees and the spikes were protruding from the Shadow's shoulder and torso. The creature's maw jittered open again slowly readying itself to snap shut.

"Vo'dis!" Eqloss screamed for her attention.

When Ka'Cyr turned back to the camp, many of the tents were on fire. The flames were licking up into the canopy and setting fire to the branches and leaves above them.

The flaming Aqlut was still screeching and

rolling around the jungle as its orange and brown fur burnt away revealing pink, blistered skin and the clear division of upper and lower jaw that the thick fur had once concealed. Without hair, Ka'Cyr saw that the Aqlut was not much more than a fearsomely large mouth; built solely for consuming its prey.

“Retreat!” Ka'Cyr screamed once she realized that, despite the flaming Aqlut's extensive injuries, it was vengefully seeking them out.

They frantically abandoned what was left of their camp and fled deeper into the darkness of the jungle.

CHAPTER 33

KEROSI HAD EATEN A FULL MEAL for the first time since fleeing Yubikot. Many of the caravan seemed apprehensive or outright hostile to Kerosi's presence but the ur'ka who'd shared food with her, Iwa, was immediately kind, welcoming, and exuberantly talkative.

Surai's soft-spoken and measured demeanor stood in contrast with Iwa as Surai added very little to conversation. She instead watched Kerosi with silent fascination.

While she had eaten the food Iwa and Surai had offered at the fire, Kerosi was regaled by Iwa with stories of the caravan's adventures up to that point. Then, Iwa began bombarding Kerosi with questions

about being Toshida. Kerosi still couldn't make out if Iwa was being sincere or whether she was mocking her disguise. Kerosi offered short, succinct answers to Iwa's questions when her mouth wasn't already full of food.

When it was clear that Kerosi would not be forthcoming with information, Iwa returned to talking about their own expedition. She'd recently been hired along with the rest of her crew out of Yontik to support Surai who was mapping A'ua'ki ruins in the desert while also looking for ancient artifacts for *the Aq'Adezean Academy of Antiquity*.

After setting out from Yontik, Surai's expedition had followed the northern edge of the Meriko sand sea until they'd reached the A'ua'ki city of Boq. Boq was well known in antiquity circles. The city generated a lot of tourism for the region but left little chance of uncovering any new discoveries as the site had been vigorously and meticulously documented for thousands of Os by historians of every age. Instead, Boq was merely the starting point for Surai's expedition that slithered south through the sands following an ancient map that lead to Qezit.

"You found Qezit?" A flash of excitement exploded across Kerosi's face, which she immediately tried to disguise.

Surai noticed with a subtle smile.

Iwa, too, immediately recognized the look and enthusiastically went to retrieve a collection of maps

and artifacts from the sleds before racing back to the fire.

Iwa first presented Kerosi with an early kingdom map.

“You can see the old topography of the region before the Or’nus was dammed up,” Kerosi yelled excitedly scanning the aged parchment.

“That’s correct,” Iwa matched Kerosi’s enthusiasm.

“The disparity between the height of the waterline at the time the early kingdom map was drawn and where the waterline is *now* meant that we had to scale the cliffs a great distance up just to reach Qezit,” Iwa sped through her words faster and faster the more excited she became. “We had to leave the sleds and the nun’bak below while we ascended to investigate the ruins. We found the exterior walls of the city. What was left of them were profoundly wind-beaten and eroded. We had-“

“Were you able to find the murals of the temple to E’om?” Kerosi asked looking up from the map. “What condition were they in?”

Iwa seemed shocked and delighted that Kerosi knew about the murals at all while Surai was quietly observing her with a look that Kerosi couldn’t quite read.

“How do you now about the Qezit murals?” Iwa pursed her features inquisitively.

“I haven’t asked you your name?” Surai said.

Kerosi swallowed hard and didn't know how to respond. She almost gave her real name but instantly realized that even if they didn't know what she looked like, a scholar from *the Aq'Adezean Academy of Antiquity* would surely recognize the name of a scribe from *the Azai Grand Library*.

She left a long enough span of silence after Surai's question that Iwa interjected: "You must be exhausted. You are welcome to share my tent for the Qi'Ar."

"Thank you but I wouldn't want to impose," Kerosi said. "You've already been so generous to feed me."

"Nonsense!" Iwa smiled, rolling up the map for Kerosi and stuffing it under her arm.

Iwa gathered up the rest of the artifacts and returned them to the sleds.

Wordlessly, Kerosi followed Iwa to her tent, leaving Surai by herself sitting by the fire while Iwa continued exuberantly recounting the expedition's experience at the ancient city of Qezit.

CHAPTER 34

BESK WAS ONE OF MANY CHESMISTS, military engineers, and technicians who were summoned to the island to present the Imperium with their solutions for clearing the dense jungle of Aq'Adez that had caused the inward momentum of the invasion to stall. Because of the near impassable terrain, the Aq'Adezean Republic was able to harass and attack the Imperium who were forced to slowly cut away the foliage using traditional axes and handsaws.

Besk stood anxiously beside a large potted tree. Two attendants had to keep the tree upright as it swayed gently in the island breeze.

In his youth, Besk had dreamed of visiting the Kingdom of the Azai but his work had kept him on the

mainland. He'd viewed the immense destruction the Imperium invasion had wrought upon the island the moment he'd disembarked from the ship and gasped. The massive *Shipmaster's Tower* that should've been overlooking the marina had been reduced to a mound of rubble at the statue's feet. Each of the protective walls leading up to the capitol from the marina had been breeched cutting a zigzagging, flame-scorched path deeper into the island.

The bodies of hundreds of Azai were dotted about the beach in various stages of decomposition. Besk had been removed from the realities of the conflict; safe and secure in his laboratory in the Imperial core. He had watched a battle from a great distance while standing on the deck the transport ship as they'd sailed from Tul past the Crimson Coast and on to the Kingdom of the Azai. From such a distance, the conflict seemed quaint and inoffensive. The small black dots of soldiers on the battlefield seemed more like insects to Besk than Y'nari. Some on the transport ship had even taken out magnifying glasses in order to better view the melee. Besk chose to return below decks to his cabin and pushed the conflict on the mainland from his mind.

When he finally reached the island, he could no longer remove himself from the reality of the invasion. The moment he disembarked, he was immediately confronted with the remains of dead Azai on the beach. He felt sick. His knees shook unsteadily as he tried to

navigate the dock above the dead and mutilated Azai partially buried in the sands.

Besk and his team were only one of the many delegations who'd arrived on the island to pitch new technology to the Imperium. Officers were corralling all of the delegates into a large courtyard and were about to start the presentations.

A Ba'Tar (Besk heard his name was Og'Adi) was seated on an angular metal throne placed atop a newly constructed wooden platform high above all of the delegates.

There was some opening pomp and circumstance delivered by a Grokix before an advisor standing next to the Ba'Tar stepped forward and addressed the delegates.

"Where's Lykoss?" Besk heard an Y'nari from one of the other delegations whisper but had no context for who Lykoss was.

Besk couldn't stop staring at the Ba'Tar's peculiar leather mask that covered their head.

An official took the stage. He presented the Ba'Tar with a brief report on the state of the invasion.

The main assault into Aq'Adez had stalled at the edge of the Meriko sand sea and the jungles to the north. Imperium forces were fortifying positions they currently held but were still waiting for relief and resupply. Segments of the Aq'Adezean Republic had broken off into their own autonomous regions ruled by

emerging Warlords. Imperium spies were monitoring the situation within the region to determine if the new Warlords could be negotiated with.

As well, two large population centres in the north had been taken over by the resistance group, the A'ji, who agitated the surrounding prefectures still loyal to the Republic.

“We have spies working with A'ji elements to coordinate attacks with our own Imperial forces,” the officer explained. “Our aim is to stoke the revolutionary fervor among the disenfranchised citizens and rally them to insurgency. Of course, there will be those who will *never* join such an endeavor and so must be tranquilized by engineered apathy through distraction and pleasure.”

The officer went on to describe their strategy of using newly uncovered technology to manipulate and pacify the Aq'Adezeans. Orbs of a crystal, called *er'gosi*, could be used to allow Y'nari to connect with those in other regions all across Asmita who possess their own respective *er'gosi* orbs. Chemicals present in a psychotropic plant, colloquially called *black leaf*, would heighten the desired effects and amplify their connection to the *er'gosi* orb when ingested or smoked.

“When Y'nari experience the orb with the black leaf, it gives the illusion of the unrestrained exchange of knowledge between individuals and the interconnectedness of communities across great

distances,” the official said. “When in reality, the whole experience is intimately surveilled by the Imperium and what information is ultimately shared is intentioned and purposeful propaganda. We have specialists who curate and monitor what certain *orb-users* are accessing and communicating with others who are also ‘*on the orb*.’”

The official went on to explain how Y’nari could freely engage with politically sensitive content but would then be flagged by those specialists monitoring their activity. Even though the Y’nari believed they are widely communicating these politically sensitive ideas, the content would be hidden from the view of other Y’nari without their knowledge.

“Early test sites have been successful within the Imperial core,” the official said. “We’ve witnessed a sharp decline in revolutionary ideation and agitation within the areas where such technology has been implemented. A great number of malcontents have already been neutralized. They believe they are still revolutionary actors within their space *on the orb* while in truth their insurrectionist praxis will not carry over into the real world. They believe their communication of revolutionary ideas casts a much wider net when their words extend only as far as the Imperium allows.”

Currently, shipments of black leaf and er’gosi orbs were being disseminated throughout Aq’Adez via commercial trade routes through third-party vendors. The er’gosi were marketed as novel devices intended

for entertainment, leisure, and social engagement.

“We are already seeing the adoption of black leaf as a recreational drug independently of the our operations,” the officer said. “We are confident that the acceptance of black leaf will accelerate the receptiveness of the orb as an escapist novelty among the citizens of Aq’Adez.”

The next presentation was on the newly passed Aq’Adezean legislation that outlawed the selling, purchasing, and ownership of Azai daloqi and how the legislation would affect the Imperium.

The Y’nari giving the presentation made a distasteful comment about being grateful they’d sold off their “*stock*” of Azai daloqi when they had since the Aq’Adezean were aggressively liquidating Azai slaves in response to the uprising in Korsik that had killed many nobles, emboldened the A’ji resistance, and burned to city to ash.

Since Aq’Adez had made it illegal to own Azai daloqi, there were grotesque reports of slave ships dumping their *stock* overboard. Aq’Adezean newspapers wrote articles about how Azai daloqi were “*too feral and savage*” to make good daloqi. They recommended that owners liquidate their stock themselves or to reach out to their local auction house called a *Da’Lynnok*. Officials would retrieve the defective daloqi at no extra cost to the owner.

Some governments were also offering compensation if owners retained at least one of the Azai’s horns as

proof of purchase after a daloqi was liquidated.

Besk had been too preoccupied with his research and experimentation to truly engage with the realities of what his nation was doing to the region. His head was full of the implications of these atrocities he could no longer look away from.

He almost missed his introduction by the Ba'Tar's advisor, Joroq. The Y'nari holding up the potted tree beside him gently poked Besk in the side and he snapped to attention.

Words had emptied from his mind and he blankly stepped forward. He hesitated dazedly before starting into his rehearsed presentation about the new chemical his team had created. This chemical would dissolve the dense trees impeding the Imperium's advance through northern Aq'Adez. The presentation ended with a display of the chemical's corrosive properties. He sprayed the potted tree with the chemical and instantly the leaves withered and browned. The trunk became soft and the bulk of the tree collapsed under its own weight forming a mound of wet tree pulp that continued to liquefy as it sizzled and bubbled.

When Besk had finished his presentation there was a long, uncomfortable, ominous silence.

The Ba'Tar called his attendant, Joroq, closer and whispered something to him.

Joroq returned to the edge of the platform and called down to Besk: "What effect does this chemical

have on Y'nari?"

"We haven't tested it on *Y'nari*," Besk laughed incredulously.

He had missed the nod that Ba'Tar Og'Adi had given Joroq from his throne atop the platform but noticed when Joroq nodded to the soldier next to him who menacingly stomped toward Besk. The soldier shoved Besk to the ground next to the moist, bubbling sludge that had once been the potted tree. The soldier yanked the container of chemicals from the research assistant's arm and began spraying Besk with the chemical.

Besk shrieked as his skin blistered, sizzled, and corroded away until all that was left was a puddle of stinking flesh, hair, and soggy bones.

CHAPTER 35

RA'QURO CRAWLED ALONG THE JUNGLE floor with one arm. Her right arm dragging limply at her side. Blood stung her remaining eye as it flowed from the gash in her forehead, down her face and neck. She blinked rapidly but the flow of blood continued to obscure her vision. Her other eye saw nothing but blackness. The bright sting as the wind hissed past screamed at the extent of her injuries.

She had narrowly avoided the monstrous maw of the Aqlut, which had snapped down violently upon her after it had slammed her into the spikes of the with a sharp flick its tentacles. She'd managed to dislodge one of the black spikes impaled through shoulder allowing her to lean away just enough that the monster's

shuddering jaw muscles snapped closed on her right side only. While not immediately fatal, the extensive injuries across the right side of her body were horrific. Long, deep lacerations emptied blood onto the jungle floor below her dangling feet. The Aqlut began opening its mouth again in that slow, jittery way. She raised her unrestrained arm in meagre defense. She was missing three fingers. She tried to scream but her voice had left her. There was a moment where she'd resigned herself to her immanent death. Then, the Aqlut simply swung away from her on its tentacles back toward the campfire where one of the other Aqlut had been set ablaze. It was shrieking and hissing into the dark of the Qi'Ar. Immediately, Ra'Quro thrashed against the spikes holding her tightly in place against the Ranmatt tree. Once free, her body dropped. She smacked the soil with a force that knocked the wind out of her.

She wheezed and coughed painfully. When her wits returned to her, she rolled underneath the relative protection of the ferns that hung low to the jungle floor.

The pain ebbed and flowed, crashed and receded upon her until she heard the sounds of violence retreating deeper into the jungle.

Part of her was relieved that she was still alive. Another was acutely aware that she was already dead. As a Shadow, such injuries demanded she be "retired". *The Shadows in the Darkness* would soon come for her.

CHAPTER 36

KEROSI STAYED AWAKE IN THE TENT long after Iwa had fallen asleep. She'd listened to Iwa rant excitedly about the details of their expedition. She had thoroughly enjoyed the distraction but, when the silence of Qi'Ar enveloped the tent, Kerosi's mind returned to her dark ruminations.

Again Grix's words come to her.

In your fear, speak only peace.

Iwa awoke before Kerosi ever found sleep. Kerosi groggily helped to take down camp. Iwa enthusiastically offered Kerosi a place beside her and Surai at the front of their caravan on their way to the city of Bans in the jungle corridor between the Meriko and Ek'Ander sand seas.

Iwa continued to talk at Kerosi during the journey with Surai silently observing them both. Eventually, Iwa commented on the heaviness of Kerosi's backpack.

Kerosi tensed. She cautiously revealed that she was carrying books. When they stopped to rest and eat, Iwa inquired as to which books she was carrying. Kerosi pulled a few out but was careful not to remove *the Crimson Insurrection of Grix* that she herself had copied as it displayed her unique guild signature prominently stamped into the spine.

"You're a rare one, Toshida," Iwa smiled at her. "Every new thing I learn about you surprises me."

"Where are you headed?" Surai asked. "Ultimately."

The question seemed to shock Iwa as much as Kerosi.

The silence extended for so long that her anxiety expelled the truth from her mouth involuntarily.

"I want to see the floating city of Es'Etik."

Surai seemed amused by this. Kerosi didn't know why.

"A friend of mine died before we could experience it together," Kerosi finally revealed. "It's important to me that I see Es'Etik. For their sake."

Surai and Iwa both nodded.

"Well, after Bans, we can take you as far as Aq'Yri," Iwa said. "After that, we head further east instead of going north to Es'Etik."

Iwa offered to give Kerosi some maps of that area

to aid her in her trek north.

“Have you been to Es’Etik?” Kerosi asked Iwa.

She shook her head.

“This is the furthest east I’ve ever been within Aq’Adez,” Iwa said. “I was raised in a small Aq’Adezean farming village in the west. I moved to Yonik to pursue work with the . . . uh, *the Academy of Antiquities*. Most of my understanding of anything east of Yonik has been purely academic until now.”

Surai made a face that Kerosi couldn’t entirely read but it made her suspicious of the truthfulness of Iwa’s words.

“What is taking you east after Aq’Yri?” Kerosi asked.

She noticed how Iwa subtly held her tongue as she looked to Surai.

“We hope to find the entrance to Og’Arta,” Surai turned to Kerosi and spoke with a calmness that contrasted starkly against Iwa’s sudden hesitation.

“Og’Arta?” Kerosi gasped. “The underground world of the Ysat’Ynarr? You believe it exists?”

“You do not?” Surai smiled.

“It’s just an unusual task for an expedition funded by the Academy of Antiquities, is it not?” Kerosi said.

“Is it?”

“Well,” Iwa smirked. “Ours is not a singular mandate and the expedition has multiple benefactors with various goals; not just the Academy.”

“I’m not sure whether that sounds ominous or intriguing,” Kerosi smiled. “Have you heard of something called an *erosikai*?”

“Where did you hear that word?” Iwa stopped walking.

“I, um, I, uh” Kerosi stammered. “I narrowly escaped the Imperium in Ek’tomok.”

Iwa and Surai exchanged silent glances.

“I’d overheard one of the soldiers talking about how they were looking for something called an *erosikai*,” Kerosi lied.

“In Ek’tomok?” Iwa said, surprised. “My little Toshida, you’ve sure made your way around Aq’Adez.

They arrived in Bans where they resupplied and rested.

At first, Kerosi protested but both Surai and Iwa convinced her to stay with them at the Inn for the Qi’Ar. It was the first time she’d laid on a mattress with warm, clean sheets since she’d stayed with Ob’Ake.

Again, she failed to sleep as dark thoughts roiled around within her skull.

CHAPTER 37

SA'TOMI STRUGGLED AGAINST THE BLEAK, angry feelings that gurgled up inside him. He was yet again trudging through the unfamiliar sands of Aq'Adez. The initial group of contested lands refugees had now swollen to include liberated Azai daloqi, Korsik peasants, and insurrectionists Iblik was calling the A'ji.

It had been ossa since they'd been freed from the crowded Korsik jail. Their saviors had announced themselves as a faint, haunting whistling within an approaching sandstorm. The sound grew to assault their ears with a screeching, malevolent wailing that made Sa'tomi feel nauseated.

Too late, Iblik had advised them all to cover their ears.

Through the barred window of the jail, Sa'tomi had seen strange silhouettes appear within the sandstorm as they descended upon the city. The silhouettes seemed to be the source of the ear-splitting shrieking. Bright explosions of flame and smoke shook the whole jail sending dust and grit raining down upon their heads.

Others were calling these shrieking silhouettes *sand demons*.

When they were liberated from the jail, Sa'tomi saw these sand demons were in fact Y'nari wearing dark leather armour. Iblik motioned for Sa'tomi to follow. The sounds of the sandstorm and the sinister whistling of the sand demons gradually quieted as the newly liberated Y'nari fled into the eastern dunes while Korsik burned behind them.

Sa'tomi was tired and irritable as they clomped through the sand but tried to hold the feelings silently inside himself.

Iblik seemed to know.

"How long has it been?" Iblik asked, falling into step beside Sa'tomi.

"Excuse me?"

Iblik lowered his voice and leaned in slightly: "The intensity in your eyes. Your clenched jaw."

"What of it?" Sa'tomi continued looking forward as they walked.

"You're missing *the chew*," Iblik whispered. "Am I correct?"

Sa'tomi tried not to let the surprise show on his face but failed miserably.

"I'm not a . . . it's just that . . . I . . . okay look," Sa'tomi stammered out his flustered response.

Iblik raised a gentle hand to as if to say: *you don't need to explain.*

"It's . . . it's been a while," Sa'tomi admitted finally.

"That's some pretty serious stuff," Iblik said. "You're hiding it very well, my friend. I only know because I've seen its effects before. I've *experienced* its effects before."

"You have?"

"It presents itself in the same way as black leaf withdrawal," Iblik said. "A key ingredient of the chew itself is black leaf."

Iblik passed his water skin to Sa'tomi and offered that he drink deeply from it. Iblik promised that, at the next stop, he would make Sa'tomi a tea that would alleviate some of the symptoms as the last of the chew made its way through him.

"You're not going to turn me in?" Sa'tomi whispered after they'd been walking a long while in silence.

Iblik shook his head.

"I've seen your soul," Iblik said.

"How so?"

"I have a gift for reading people," Iblik said. "You may have come from Tul but you are not of the Imperium."

They stopped for the Qi'Ar once the procession had reached the edge of the sands where the jungle began. Iblik excused himself to take Sa'tomi deeper into the trees to find ingredients for his tea that would combat the effects of the chew.

When he was sure no one else was around, Iblik pulled back the cloth wrap around his head revealing Tulean horns.

"Why didn't you tell me you were Tulean?" Sa'tomi asked.

"I couldn't know if you were really a prisoner or if you were a Tulean Imperium spy only *pretending* to be from the contested lands," Iblik said. "I'm a Genarsi from the contested lands along the Aq'Adezean border. Both the Imperium Tul'Ynarr and the Aq'Adezean Sun'Ynarr treated me as an enemy so I denied allegiance to either."

Iblik explained how he'd come from a once thriving community of the Tulean diaspora after *the War of the Four Realms* generations ago. Long before they were targeted by the Aq'Adezean powers and pushed out in the wilds.

"The survivors were among those who first initiated our A'ji resistance," Iblik said. "Others won't understand that, despite our horns, we disavow the colonial aspirations of the Imperium."

Sa'tomi removed his stolen Aq'Adezean hat revealing his own Tulean horns.

"I never wanted to . . ." Sa'tomi paused. "I tried

to escape relocation during the civil war but I was captured and sent to the front lines. I didn't want to take part in any of this but they . . ."

"You don't need to explain anything to me," Iblik said. "I'll not tell anyone."

Sa'tomi put the hat on again.

When they returned to camp, Iblik brewed the restorative tea for Sa'tomi and poured it into a water skin once it had cooled enough.

The instant the concoction touched his tongue, a buzzing feeling of contentedness began to infiltrate his mind. It was akin to the feeling of displacement that Imperium chew provided but was far more manageable. The usual nauseating churning of his insides from the withdrawal was lulled to the background of his attention. Instead, his body felt warm and light. Dark emotions dissolved from his mind yet it wasn't the dissociative euphoria the way Imperium chew would cause him to feel. He still felt present and aware of his agency but the overtly negative effects of sobriety had been placated for the moment.

When they resumed their trek the next ossa, they cut south through the jungle. Arriving on the other side in the lands of the Genarsi.

Iblik explained how two brothers once governed the lands of the Genarsi until both fell in a vicious battle against the colonial ambitions of the Aq'Adezean Republic. After their defeat, large swaths of Genarsi

lands were occupied by the Aq'Adezean Republic who deemed the indigenous Genarsi *bandits* and *outlaws*. The Genarsi erected fortifications along their shrinking frontier to protect the dwindling population centres and their ancestral hunting grounds from raiders who meant to pillage *the savage lands* for slaves and resources.

Eventually, the Genarsi were pushed so far from their former territory that they became irreparably fractured and isolated from one another becoming autonomous communities unto themselves among the shifting borders of the ethnically Tul'Ynarr and Sun'Ynarr populations within the contested lands. Movement was highly restricted for Genarsi communities by the region's competing colonial powers. They were heavily surveilled and monitored by both the Tuleans and Aq'Adezeans.

The eastern frontier of the Imperium had given the disenfranchised *pure* Tuleans within Tul an escape from the realities of life in the Imperial core without forfeiting the privileges Tulean citizenship commanded.

From an Imperial standpoint, the *impure* Genarsi Tul'Ynarr were seen as dirty squatters; openly defiant of the Empire. However, they were also a necessary buffer between the pure Tuleans of the Imperium frontier and the Sun'Ynarr of the Aq'Adezean Republic to the east.

Sa'tomi hadn't noticed that they'd walked most of the ossa as his body was still feeling the energy of

Iblik's tea. He was almost surprised when the rest of the procession had decided to stop for dinner.

Sa'tomi was only mildly hungry but found he was extremely parched. He asked Iblik if there was any more of his special tea.

"I don't think that would be the best idea," Iblik said. "You can have some more tomorrow but for now you should be drinking water and you should really eat something."

They arrived at Es'Aelya before Qi'Ar but messengers from the A'ji had rushed out to greet them before they entered the city. They split the massive procession of Y'nari into many smaller groups. Each would take different routes to an A'ji hideout so as to avoid detection by Imperium or Republic forces.

Evoq and the refugees Sa'tomi had originally been travelling with were separated into one group. Sa'tomi was about to join them when Iblik asked if he would assist him on an errand in Es'Aelya.

Initially, Sa'tomi declined as he wished to remain with the refugees to ensure they would arrive safely at the A'ji hideout but Iblik assured him that he would rejoin the refugees later that Qi'Ar after the errand was completed.

Iblik's errand was a meeting with a Genarsi representative at a residential building in the poor section of Es'Aelya. Iblik told Sa'tomi to wait outside while the meeting took place, which he found confusing

as he'd specifically been requested to assist Iblik. Sa'tomi was instead sitting on the side of the dirt road outside the residential building waiting for Iblik's meeting to conclude.

Sa'tomi watched the empty, dusty streets and realized that no one else was outside. There were shops lining the street but they were all shuttered.

He was still very thirsty but his appetite had completely disappeared as the negative effects of the residual Imperium chew within him began to take hold again. He could feel his mind returning to the familiar, fragmented chaos that he called normal. The sharp agitation of anxiety spiked once again within his head.

There was trash laying in the street at his feet and he noticed the movement of the insects that swarmed over the scattered refuse. He watched intently while the various kinds of insects skittered about.

"Isn't it interesting," Iblik started and Sa'tomi's body snapped to shocked attention. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I was going to say: these two kinds of insects, red and black, will not attack each other when they cross each other's path. Isn't that interesting?"

Sa'tomi turned back to look at the two sets of insects as they navigated separate paths through the trash at his feet.

"But, should you scoop some up," Iblik grabbed a cracked glass jar amid the trash and scooped up some dirt from the ground containing both red and black

insects. "Place them in a jar. Shake 'em up. These differently coloured insects will now see each other as enemies and mercilessly attack one another."

Sa'tomi watched the cracked glass jar as the insects battled within.

"Really, it's no different for Y'nari," Iblik said staring into the jar.

"So our *real* enemy is whoever is shaking our jar," Sa'tomi said, unable to look away from the warring insects.

"I think there's a profound truth at the centre of that," Iblik said.

"Have you finished your errand, Iblik?" Sa'tomi asked after he'd grown weary of witnessing the senseless insect violence.

"I have," Iblik said just as a group of Y'nari exited the residence behind him. "Are you ready to go home?"

The largest of the Y'nari, a gruff Pod'ka whom Iblik called Waqir, seemed to lead the others. They were afraid of him in any case. Waqir immediately showed himself to be erratic and volatile. It instantly made Sa'tomi uncomfortable and distrustful of him.

CHAPTER 38

SHE'D ONLY HEARD OF THE WU'JIKARR in the context of their opposition to the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos. Destim's account of how Ka'Cyr had been rescued from one of the Wu'jikarr temples as a young ur'ka had never included descriptions of what the temples look like. Now, in her dream, Ka'Cyr could see the Wu'jikarr temple as if she were truly, physically there. It felt intimately familiar.

Ka'Cyr woke up shouting someone's name.

The name dissolved from her mind as the terror of the previous Qi'Ar rushed in to take its place at the front of her mind. Any details of the dream disappeared along with it.

The injured, tired soldiers laying in the cave beside

her shot up frantically as they readied themselves for violence.

Beqit had pulled out his sword and was shakily holding it out in front of him in the direction of the cave entrance.

“Where are they?” Eqloss yelled. “Do you see them?”

Ka’Cyr shoved her embarrassment deep inside herself and rose to her feet stoically trying to project an aura of authority in direct conflict with the frazzled chaos that clouded her mind.

The Aqlut had slowly pursued them through the jungle most of the Qi’Ar. They swung eerily through the branches of the trees overhead at a pace that deceptively offered Ka’Cyr and the soldiers the impression that they’d successfully gotten ahead of the monsters. Each time, the Aqlut would emerge from the trees to force the exhausted expedition back on their feet to resume their episodic escape.

Mōt was already casting shimmering beams of light through the leaves and branches of the trees when Beqit had discovered the partially concealed entrance to a cave. They were far enough in front of the Aqlut that they were able to find safety within the hidden cave before the orange and brown furred monsters swung past them overhead and continued on deeper into the jungle.

The soldiers had taken shifts at the mouth of the

cave watching anxiously for the Aqlut to return while the others rested.

Ka'Cyr's expedition had started as Destim, herself, and fourteen recruits.

"We're not going to talk about how we just lost Wulo and Kaz?" Beqit said. "How we lost Rin?"

Beqit read Ka'Cyr's face and realized that she didn't know the names of the two soldiers who'd been horrifically devoured by the Aqlut or the soldier who'd been grotesquely digested by the Obloxos.

"They died for you and you don't know their names?" Beqit almost shrieked but remembered the Aqlut were still searching for them.

"I remember their names," Ka'Cyr lied. "We'll have time to mourn when we complete our mission."

"What is our mission exactly?" Eqloss inquired, narrowing their eyes at Ka'Cyr.

"Watch your tone," Ka'Cyr squinted back at him. "You're dangerously close to subordination."

"He has a point," Beqit said. "We received our deployment mandate to assist you, but to assist you to do *what* you've never said."

"And I needn't say," Ka'Cyr said.

"If we're going to die, I'd at least appreciate knowing what we're dying for," another of the soldiers, whose name she didn't know, said.

Ka'Cyr pretended not to acknowledge the question and pushed past the soldiers through the hanging vines

and ferns that concealed the cave entrance.

The jungle air was smouldering yet wet against her skin. Various animal calls and the chirping of birds echoed around her.

“Well?” Beqit stomped out of the cave behind her.

“Well what?” Ka’Cyr’s voice was calm if slightly annoyed but inside her mind she was livid.

Beqit scoffed.

“Four,” Beqit said. “Four are dead from an expedition of *sixteen*. One of them being our Grokix.”

“I’m aware,” Ka’Cyr said.

“Then you should see that we need to halt our advance into Aq’Adez and return to Tulean-friendly territory immediately,” Eqloss said.

“We can’t,” Ka’Cyr said.

“We *must*,” Beqit rose his voice again. “Most of our provisions are still baking in the Meriko sand sea or at that the camp we abandoned after the Aqlut attacked.”

“So we must push forward to the next settlement to resupply,” Ka’Cyr responded coolly.

“The Aq’Adezeans won’t resupply us!” Another soldier shot his arms up in protest.

“We’ll make them,” Ka’Cyr said, flatly.

Some of the soldiers laughed and a pulsing anger ignited within her.

“Oh?” Beqit rolled his eyes disdainfully at her.

“WE’LL MAKE THEM!” Ka’Cyr shouted and Beqit’s whole body erupted into flames.

Eqloss and the other soldiers recoiled in shock and surprise as Beqit sprinted around shrieking as he burned.

The others impotently tried to put him out but the heat was too intense. They had to step back as Beqit screamed and flailed around while the flames entombed him.

One of the frightened soldiers took off running into the jungle back the way they'd come and disappeared into the trees.

Now the expedition had been whittled down to ten.

Beqit had been right. They were critically low on supplies. Ka'Cyr had lost the majority of her heavy Sen'Daris Er'Ebos armour along her journey across Aq'Adez. She could not return to *the Order* having potentially ruined relations with the Imperium, allowed an ancient staff of her Order to be destroyed, and failed to keep Grokix Destim alive. Nor had she uncovered the identity of the Grokix assassin or recovered the erosikai.

After Beqit stopped burning, the rest of the soldiers sat around him silently, unwilling to lock eyes with Ka'Cyr. They buried him within the cave before they continued on. The soldiers' fear of Ka'Cyr ended their brief subordination. They followed her orders without question when she demanded they resume their journey into Aq'Adez.

Eqloss gave subdued updates on their location

anytime they stopped to rest. The others were slowing their pace and meekly requesting rest more and more frequently. Ka'Cyr was feeling unusually energetic and, each time they stopped, she could feel herself getting more and more aggravated and impatient.

Their maps were found to be inaccurate. When they passed through lands Eqloss had assured would be uninhabited, they were instead ambushed by Sun'Ynarr wearing bright yellow armour and flying an unfamiliar flag of some Aq'Adezean warlord.

The yellow armoured Y'nari looked like they were about to slaughter them where they stood but Ka'Cyr effortlessly incinerated the nearest two Sun'Ynarr with spheres of flame she launched from her fists.

The confused and awestruck Sun'Ynarr dropped their weapons and stared silently at her.

She took a moment to formulate a plan as the silence swelled.

"I am a Vo'dis of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos," Ka'Cyr bellowed. "You will take me to speak with your leader or you will be destroyed."

The Sun'Ynarr blinked numbly at her but eventually brought Ka'Cyr and the other soldiers to a settlement at the edge of the jungle. The settlement was obviously re-purposed to support a much larger population than intended. It was evident that these Sun'Ynarr were not the original inhabitants of the settlement and had usurped and cast out those who'd lived there before.

Though it was more likely that they had scavenged the empty abandoned city without bloodshed.

From context, Ka'Cyr gathered that these Sun'Ynarr were refugees or deserters of the Aq'Adezean Republic.

Their leader fashioned themselves as a warlord but showed himself to be bumbling and inexperienced. She easily bluffed her way through an explanation about how they were an advance scouting party for the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos and the Imperium.

"Our failure to return will cause our armies to rage down upon you and burn your lands to ash," Ka'Cyr stated coldly.

The warlord (he called himself Owtol) claimed he was no longer affiliated with the Aq'Adezean Republic and ruled *his* lands autonomously. Clearly panicked, Owtol offered to fully resupply their expedition and compliment their numbers with mercenaries to assist them as they travelled through *his* lands. He gave Ka'Cyr's expedition various maps to supplement those Eqloss had managed to carry with him and to replace the ones he'd been forced to abandon along the way. In exchange, Owtol asked for a pledge from Ka'Cyr that the Imperium and the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos would acknowledge the sovereignty of his lands when their expanding war against Aq'Adez pushed further east.

CHAPTER 39

IWA AND SURAI HAD LEFT KEROSI IN AQ'YRI earlier that mossa to continue on their quest for ruins, artifacts, and the entrance to the fabled underground world of Og'Arta. Part of her wanted to continue travelling with them but felt a sharp anxiety when she thought of diverting from her path through Aq'Adez to the floating city of Es'Etik. She'd read and re-read Qera's note to Ob'Ake over and over again as she lay in the bed Iwa and Surai had rented for her while she remained in Aq'Yri. She was committed, more than ever, to completing the journey. If not for herself, then for Qera and Ob'Ake.

She ate food at the Inn and only superficially noticed that some of the locals were acting erratically but she largely tried to ignore it.

When she'd become overwhelmed by the emotions that reading Qera's note to Ob'Ake conjured, Kerosi instead fished out one of the dry middle kingdom texts from Qera's backpack about the history of Aq'Yri:

Svektik, the first Barracks Emperor, was a military leader who seized power by virtue of his command of the army without any political experience, a supporting faction, distinguished ancestors, or a hereditary claim to any throne. He operated as a warlord, reliant on the military to retain his power. Some of the aristocracy didn't appreciate being ruled by peasant and backed an unsuccessful revolt against the Barracks Emperor's regime. Afterward, many of the aristocracy were publically and brutally made examples of.

While not *technically* a Warlord, the Barracks Emperor met the same fate at the hands of *the Coalition of the Four Realms* reverting power to the aristocratic families who'd survived the purge. After a long span of relative peace, nomads began encroaching on the borderlands of the new republic's territory. They claimed to have been run out of their own lands further north by beings that matched descriptions of the monstrous Xi'O.

At the same time, a moral system was developed to hold society together by providing officially accepted norms, morals, and rituals that regulated social behaviour between ruler and subject. It had an insistence on harsh measures to reestablish law and order after the chaos of the Warlord Period.

New cults arose.

Polemic literature was released by those in power to denounce what they considered

was a bastardized mysticism practiced by the cults. These cults, however, offered the relative security, stability, and prosperity of monastic life in a countryside devastated by war and rebellion. Peasants preferred to give up their independence to avoid the burden of heavy taxation and forced labour imposed by the new rulers of Aq'Adez. The monasteries grew, drawing both peasants from families of hereditary serfs and curious new followers from higher classes, intrigued by the alternative to the rigid status-quo in Aq'Adez. Eventually, these monasteries became a tremendous economic and political force that rivalled the existing aristocratic power structure. This led to harsh, restrictive measures and brutal anti-cult movements.

Members of the upper-middle class found monastic life attractive as well. An official career was beset with dangers and political posturing whereas the monastic life offered a hiding place for those who wished to avoid the intrigue and feuds of higher official circles. Thus, monasteries became the centres of learning and culture. This made monastic life even more appealing to members of minor families for whom the higher positions in government and society were unattainable.

There was a coalition of Aq'Adezean elements who signed a temporary alliance to focus on combating the growing influence of the monasteries. This aggression only forced the monasteries to develop sophisticated defenses and a standing army of believers, volunteers, and mercenaries who pushed the coalition back.

Aq'Adezean rulers with foresight began to bolster their ties to the monasteries with tributes and patronage, vying with one another to build

temples and granting land to monasteries like the monumental cave temples of the Yu'Aq cult.

Some rulers counterbalanced their offerings with the demand for joint governmental control over monastic lands with the monks.

This was met with fierce opposition.

The rulers waged futile, costly wars with the monasteries that only depleted their own resources while bolstering the numbers of converts to monastic life. The order and stability the rulers had once been able to offer eventually crumbled away. More and more, Y'nari began congregating within unaffiliated settlements that sprung up across the region.

Eventually, these separate settlements began trading with the Yu'Aq and with one another forming a loose amalgamation of urbanized Y'nari that became known as the Aq'Yri after its capitol. Rather than having a familial hierarchy as was the tradition of their former rulers, the Aq'Yri adopted an early form of the prefecture system. There were several dozen prefects across Aq'Yri territory where the former unaffiliated settlements became vibrant cities. An Aq'Yri prefect was no more than a functionary and could only hold the position for a limited term. Every Aq'Yri citizen was trained so that any one of them could become a prefect should they need to fulfill that role. The duty was chosen randomly after a census at the end of the last prefect's tenure. However, there were avenues open to citizens who wished to remove a prefect who was corrupt or otherwise unfit to carry out their role.

Unlike in past regimes, ur'ka could (and often did) hold positions of power. Even serving as prefect. Prefects were required to submit annual

reports to the Aq'Yri court in the capitol so that their performance could be adjudicated.

Back in the Warlord period, combat had been the profession of soldiers whose lengthy, grueling training occupied the bulk of their lives. In the time of the Aq'Yri, mercenaries were employed instead to bolster their volunteer, largely untrained, guerrilla-style infantry. They were, however, rarely called upon to fight. Life in Aq'Yri lands was so appealing that, rather than enacting violence, foreign Y'nari assimilated readily into Aq'Yri society.

In opposition, the descendants of the aristocratic families whom the Aq'Yri had forced from their lands tried to fuse the disparate centers they still controlled into a loose confederacy called *the Paraq*. An extra tax was levied on Paraq individuals who had reached adulthood yet still lived with multiple family members in a single dwelling. Eventually, those taxed came to include all households that contained more than a single pair of monogamous partners and their shared offspring. The calculated and intended result of these extra costs was the breakdown of the extended family system that had been the traditional living arrangement in Aq'Adez until then. This forced individuals into separate small apartments, saddling them with the financial burdens that had previously been carried by large extended families. This artificially increased production. As well, it forced a higher demand for what limited resources and goods currently existed in the region controlled by the Paraq and necessitated territorial expansion.

Meanwhile, public works projects within neighboring Aq'Yri lands set about constructing

a network of roadways connecting their cities together. Citizens were gratefully and willingly conscripted to construct city walls, garrison stations, and signal towers, which extended far across Aq'Yri territory. A long border wall was erected separating the land of the Aq'Yri prefectures with their Paraqan neighbours. The Paraq decried the defensive constructions which, they claimed, violated their sovereign borders. The Aq'Yri, however, refused to recognize their neighbours claim to the land. Numerous but limited conflicts exploded at the intersection of sites that both sides believed were their respective sovereign territory. The Aq'Yri's superior military might eventually corralled the Paraq into a patch of land pressed against *the Swamp of Sug'Ogg*. The Aq'Yri began construction on a second border wall that ran from the mountains in the north, across the jungle, and into the sands ending at the cliffs atop the Red Coast in the south.

Angered by the construction of the second border wall, the Paraq moved their subjects and what little military they had against the Aq'Yri wall to harass its construction or simply to bolster populations in lands they still believed belonged to them. When Paraq leaders saw how their subjects were enticed by the Aq'Yri way of life, they confiscated their weapons and purged populations, massacring thousands who dared criticize Paraq policies. Paraq books dealing with anything other than law, horticulture, herbal medicine, and approved Paraqan history were kept from public circulation. Such knowledge was considered dangerous and unsettling to the order of their fledgling confederacy. Having been heavily taxed, monitored, and micromanaged by a

bloated and corrupt Paraqan bureaucracy, a revolt erupted. Rebel forces assassinated their southern regent sparking *the Paraqan Revolutionary Wars*. The Paraq faced the combined pressures of mass emigration, economic and political instability, and the peasant-led revolutionary wars all while opportunistic leaders vied for power of their own.

Eventually, the Paraq split into three competing states (Upper Paraq, Greater Paraq, and Coastal Paraq) whose armies required larger and larger bribes to remain loyal. The ongoing increases in military expenditures caused problems for successors. Instead of warring in foreign lands as they had once been, the shattered Paraqan states were frequently put on the defensive by having to quell the many uprisings against the over-taxed and over-worked peasantry. The military eventually devolved into an over-paid state police-force who were frequently sadistic, corrupt, and incompetent; spending most of their time engaging in excess, frivolity, and grotesque abuses of power. The lack of military and economic conquests in foreign lands cut off the Paraq from an essential source of income, which exacerbated their dwindling cache of already limited resources and materials remaining on their side of both Aq'Yri walls. This made the near-constant economic devastation wrought by the civil war all the more dangerous to continued Paraq hegemony. The depletion of the army's ranks through Os of bloody engagements required conscription, which further strained the Paraq's shrinking labour force. Fighting on multiple fronts, the increasing cost of the military, ineffectual bureaucrats, and corrupt tax collection each contributed to the massive financial crisis that-

Vociferous voices were shrieking at one another outside her window. She closed the textbook and returned it to her backpack.

When she approached the window, she saw many of the villagers were engaged in muffled altercations she could not make out with any clarity through the wooden shutters. She swung them wide and immediately witnessed two ur'ka verbally assaulting each other by the steps of the Inn beneath her.

Across the street, three Pod'ka were wildly striking one another with fat fists while shouting obscenities and paranoid rantings.

She noticed the sickly sweet smell that swelled up into the air. Then she heard the shrill, ominous whistling of the *sand demons*.

CHILDREN
OF THE
CRIMSON
INSURRECTION
PART III

CHAPTER 40

SA'TOMI FOLLOWED A STEP BEHIND IBLIK. The rest of the Genarsi marched ahead as Waqir led them through the sands.

Even the way the aggressive and unpredictable Pod'ka moved annoyed and angered Sa'tomi. He'd come to know many Y'nari like Waqir who enjoyed positions of authority within the Imperial Army.

Pompous.

Egotistical.

Sadistic.

Volatile.

These types didn't need Imperium chew to warp them into monsters. They'd been that way from the start.

Iblik noticed Sa'tomi's gaze and slowed his pace so the pair fell further behind the others.

Iblik whispered to him: "you've been quiet."

Sa'tomi just nodded.

"Your thoughts must be very loud," Iblik said.

"When are they not?" Sa'tomi replied.

"I've been told thoughts are not so vociferous when allowed their freedom," Iblik smirked.

They walked a few more steps in silence until Sa'tomi whispered back: "You trust this Waqir?"

Iblik laughed.

"I trust no one," he said.

"Where is he leading us?" Sa'tomi asked. "Why have we not reconnected with the other refugees?"

"We shall shortly," Iblik assured.

"Shortly? We've been marching in the wrong direction for almost an ossa. It'll take that long merely to return to where we split away from them."

"We will be taking a different route but, I assure you, we will rejoin your traveling companions by Qi'Ar," Iblik said. "We've two more to add to our party before we can return to the others."

Mōt was setting behind them when they finally stopped at the crest of a rocky escarpment that fell off sharply into a valley far below them. The slope downward was pockmarked with many cavernous openings that the party had to carefully maneuver around. The loose fragments of shale and small rocks

shifted with their movement causing whole sections of the escarpment to slide and give way underneath their feet. One of the Genarsi lost their balance and began tumbling forward.

Waqir had been close enough to effortlessly snatch his companion before their fall. Instead, Waqir chose to watch almost gleefully as they flailed and crashed down the side of the escarpment. Landing in a painful heap at the base of the slope covered in a myriad of scrapes and scratches. Waqir began laughing and threw his head back boisterously.

“Still haven’t learned how to walk, eh?” He chortled.

The others meekly pressed past Waqir and helped the injured Genarsi to their feet. Sa’tomi saw their concern for the other and watched as they check the injured Genarsi over while Waqir continued to laugh cruelly.

Sa’tomi could make out two figures in the distance. They were already halfway between a settlement on the other side of the valley and the escarpment.

Sa’tomi and Iblik arrived safely at the bottom of the hill. Sa’tomi asked the injured Genarsi how they were and they responded dismissively. Downplaying the extent of their injuries which Sa’tomi could see were not insignificant.

They sat down where they could. They drank deeply from their water-skins and took bites out of their chalky, brittle rations while they waited for the

two figures to cross the rest of the distance across the valley to reach them.

The figures addressed only Waqir. Sa'tomi watched their exchange silently. They'd placed *something* in the well in the settlement across the valley but Sa'tomi had no context for what.

Iblik clapped his hands together and smiled.

"Shall we to the gate?"

"*The gate?*" Sa'tomi asked.

Without elaborating, Iblik motioned for them to follow him back up the escarpment a ways until they reached the dark mouth of one of the many caves dotting the rocky slope.

Sa'tomi's eyes were slow to adjust to the darkness as they entered the cave. The moist, musty air stood in direct contrast to the hot, dry winds that howled and whistled at the mouth of the cave entrance behind them. Initially, they all had to crouch when entering but, after a few steps, the cavern expanded above them into a dome before it closed in again on the other side branching off into smaller tunnels. The weak light from outside was swallowed up by the time it reached the other side of the domed cavern. Sa'tomi stared into the inky black mouthes of the smaller tunnels with apprehension but noticed one of them was dimly exuding a blue glow from deep within.

"This way," Iblik said stepping in front of the party and directing them to follow him into the faint blue

glow.

As they got closer, Sa'tomi saw the tunnel became a dead end. He saw the source of the blue light just before the cold, wet wall of rock terminated their path. It was a massive sphere of energy that hummed and vibrated with a power that sent shifting bands of blue light pulsing about the tunnel walls.

Looking into the sphere, Sa'tomi could see many Y'nari walking around a brightly lit courtyard. It reminded him of the Imperial palaces of Western Tul. Somehow, the Y'nari inside the sphere existed within a location much larger than the sphere itself.

Waqir pushed past Sa'tomi, shoving him aside as he passed through the humming blue skin of the energy sphere.

The other Genarsi followed behind Waqir and appeared on the other side in the bright courtyard.

"What sorcery is this?" Sa'tomi breathed quietly.

"*This* is how we rejoin your traveling companions without backtracking great distances," Iblik said, stepping through the sphere himself.

Sa'tomi was left alone in the damp, musty tunnel staring into the blue glow of the energy sphere. Once through, Iblik motioned for Sa'tomi to follow him. Sa'tomi cautiously reached a hand out to touch the sphere's blue skin and felt his hand pass through. The temperature between the two spaces were not the same and the unnerving sensation involuntarily forced

Sa'tomi to recoil in surprise.

Iblik smiled and stepped back through the sphere, appearing again in the tunnel next to Sa'tomi.

"How is this possible?" Sa'tomi's shocked expression elicited a smirk from Iblik who gently gestured for him to follow.

"It's entirely safe," Iblik said. "I assure you."

Iblik stepped back through the sphere and into the bright courtyard on the other side. Sa'tomi took a deep breath and with one slightly hesitant hop passed through the sphere.

The musty scent of the tunnel immediately vanished. In its place was the fragrant smell of incense, candle wax, and burning wicks. The sound too was disorienting as the tight, claustrophobic tunnel behind him had given way to the expansive, echoing ceilings of marble and stone above.

"Where are we?" Sa'tomi asked, unblinking.

"This is Doxiq," Iblik said. "The home base of the A'ji."

"No," Sa'tomi said flatly. "That's impossible. Doxiq is a myth. Even if it once existed, it would now be deep within Ovin."

"Precisely," Iblik smiled.

"You're not making any sense," Sa'tomi sighed.

"There will be time for explanations," Iblik began. "For now, you've more than earned a rest. You must be exhausted."

Sa'tomi nodded.

As Iblik led Sa'tomi away, Waqir and the other Genarsi disappeared down a long corridor in the opposite direction. A few of the other Genarsi were helping their injured friend but Waqir was many paces ahead and fast leaving the others behind.

The next moments were a blur to Sa'tomi. He only vaguely remembered what Iblik had been explaining to him about the layout of Doxiq. Iblik pointed in the general direction of where he would find the mess hall, the barracks, the library and other important locations but Sa'tomi was exhaustedly blinking; slowly. He found himself craving the invigorating feeling of the Imperium chew and Iblik seemed to notice it too.

"Forgive me," Iblik said. "There'll be time enough after you've rested to resume your orientation."

Sa'tomi was astonished to learn that he would have his own room within Doxiq. Clean clothes were neatly folded and were waiting for him on the warm and welcoming bed that was larger and more inviting than any he'd slept on since he'd been torn from his family's home in Western Tul.

Iblik excused himself and left Sa'tomi alone in his new room. He quickly changed into his new clothes and left the soiled, dirty clothes he'd scavenged off that dead Aq'Adezean in a pile in the corner.

When his body finally lay prone, he was asleep.

CHAPTER 41

THE WALLS OF THE CITY WERE INDEFENSIBLE. Even the residential spaces were open to one another with wide arches providing the stability of walls without obscuring what was beyond.

He considered that it shouldn't even be called a city in the way that Aq'Adezeans and Tuleans would classify such a settlement. He didn't know the name of the empty city they'd stumbled into. Just that it had once belonged to the Ix'Arki and now belonged to them.

The thief, the herald, and the weaver.

Ubatt, *the thief*, wondered how the former inhabitants had found privacy within structures that were so open. Personal ownership was something these Ix'Arki seemed not to value either as Ubatt had combed

through many of the residences and found little that could be considered valuable. Many residences looked like they'd been at the centre of violent altercations with objects and humble furniture strewn around. If the Ix'Arki had fled themselves or if they'd been forcefully removed, Ubatt had no way of knowing except that only the three of them were there now.

Wist, *the herald*, had sat with his back to the wall quietly ruminating on the events of the past few ossa. He hadn't said much to the other two after they'd escaped Ru'Bisq.

When the city of Ru'Bisq fell, the invading Tulean Imperium toppled the walls of the city's infamous jail, *Bosyl Kep*. Freeing all the inmates. No one had ever escaped Bosyl Kep in all of the Os that it had existed so it was unsurprising that the Tuleans would want to tear it down. Freeing its occupants would add another layer to the psychological terror the Tuleans were casting over the lands it invaded as all in Aq'Adez were told Bosyl Kep was the home of the most evil and violent criminals the Republic had apprehended.

Ubatt had called a cell in Bosyl Kep home for most of his adult life. He was arrested after a travelling Aq'Adezean claimed Ubatt had lifted a satchel of coins and gems from their cart. In truth, Ubatt had accidentally grabbed the wrong satchel from the merchant who had been callously flaunting their wares (fruit, vegetables, and wine) on their way through Ubatt's village as

they made their trek to larger population centres. The merchant had refused to sell the impoverished villagers any from his cart while he rested in their modest Inn despite the food insecurity the whole region was facing due to an ongoing drought. The villagers were too meek to call out the merchant's racist and classist behaviour. Ubatt had waited for the merchant to retreat to his bedchamber at the Inn before sneaking into the stables to pilfer some of the edible goods but, in the darkness of Qi'Ar, Ubatt had opened the wrong satchel. By the time Ubatt realized his mistake he'd already been apprehended by the merchant's bodyguards. The merchant's status streamlined Ubatt's journey to incarceration within Bosyl Kep where he'd stayed until the invading Imperium freed him.

Initially, conditions were discouragingly awful but, a few Os in, Ubatt received an offer for marginally better treatment and accommodations. In exchange, he was expected to causing harm to other inmates at the whims of his jailers. At first, he would only intimidate the other inmates who held *wrong* political affiliations.

It quickly became something darker.

He'd been compelled to break fingers, noses, and ribs at the request of his jailers. It quickly escalated to torture and amputations. Eventually, to murder. Those Os were intentionally foggy within his mind as he'd found he could voluntarily remove his thoughts from his body whenever he was asked to carry out violence

he found particularly heinous.

The herald, Wist, had watched with his master from the ramparts of Ru'Bisq as the Imperium descended upon the city. Wist had attempted to desert his post when it was clear the Tuleans would take Ru'Bisq. His master had tried to kill him. Wist was able to absorb the thrust of the officer's short dagger within his thick tabard decorated with the coat of arms of the very master who stabbed at him. Wist used the moment of confusion to charge violently against his master knocking him backward against the stone blocks of the ramparts. The momentum and heavy armour of his master sent his body careening over the edge. His master flailed wildly as he fell until his body smashed against the rocks below.

The third in their unlikely trio was Nola, *the weaver*, who had once lived in one of the small coastal villages on the edge of the contested lands but was captured during a raid by slavers. They sold her to a wealthy Aq'Adezean in Ru'Bisq who was buying up daloqi to work in their massive garment factory on the other end of Ru'Bisq from Bosyl Kep where they trained her to become a weaver.

The three had happened upon each other in the jungle and hesitantly decided to travel together. They stayed ahead of the Imperium as they retreated deeper into the jungle where they found this empty Ix'Arki city.

Nola had found remnants of food in some of the

residences but then she heard Ubatt call to them.

In one of the indefensible residences, Ubatt had found a large room with a long table used for communal eating. There were many chairs but they had been overturned and strewn around the room.

Nola noticed that steam was rising from the spout of a tea kettle. Embers of a fire were subtly glowing in the hearth.

A robed figure appeared before them.

And then another.

And another.

The tired trio surrendered to the robed figures without incident. They were shackled and led to a clearing on the other side of the settlement where large carts held the cages that other robed Y'nari were loading the captured Ix'Arki into.

Ubatt's brief freedom had been shortlived and the familiarity he felt for his new cage was causing bright panic to overwhelm his senses. The robed Y'nari transported them east into the jungle but Ubatt spent most of that time voluntarily removing his mind from his physical body. The Ix'Arki were speaking a language he did not understand. In the brief moments he returned to his body, he noticed that neither Wist nor Nola were being transported in the same cage as him.

The caravan carried them further east until they finally stopped within overgrown ruins that had been reclaimed by the jungle over Os of isolation and neglect.

The robed Y'nari unloaded the captured Ix'Arki and the separated trio from their respective cages directly into holding cells deep within the ruins.

No one was given food and subconsciously Ubatt knew *exactly* what that meant.

After a period of time in the holding cell Ubatt could not quantify with any certainty, the robed Y'nari began a ritual that involved chanting in that language Ubatt could not decipher.

They pulled one of the Ix'Arki from their cells and led them in front of a massive circular well at the centre of the room.

The chanting stopped and all the robed cultists lowered their heads as an Y'nari in ornamented robes wearing an intricately ostentatious headdress entered the room. Following the leader of the cultists was an Y'nari who held a solid chest made of leather and darkly stained wood. The torches around the room sprayed uneven splashes of light against the chest as it opened. Ubatt could make out some kind of large tome and a crystal orb that glowed a haunting violet colour.

The cult leader removed the glowing orb and held it in both hands. He raised the orb above the head of the Ix'Arki prisoner who was restrained by two cultists on either side of him.

The cultists resumed their chanting and the orb began to glow brighter with a building intensity. The Ix'Arki screamed out in pain. Ubatt could see green

energy seeping from the victim's skin. The energy hung in the air for a moment and then began to collect around the hazy glow of the orb.

Along with the chanting and growing hum of the bright crystal orb, Ubatt began to hear something stirring within the giant circular well at the centre of the room.

He saw a single slimy tentacle reach out from the blackness of the well. There were wet squelching noises calling from within that climaxed in an earsplitting shriek. The sound jolted all the captives within their cages. The cultists stoically continued their chanting. More tentacles emerged as the chanting became louder and the glow of the crystal orb became blindingly brilliant. There was a bright pop and then the violet light was snuffed out leaving them in the weak splashes of orange light cast off from the torches positioned around the room.

Ubatt squinted as his eyes adjusted again. What remained of the Ix'Arki was a thin, skeletal husk of what he'd once been only moments ago.

The chorus of chanting was silenced by the cult leader who began an ominous solo performance before returning the crystal orb within its wood and leather chest.

The Ix'Arki's eyes had been burned away. Their skin was blistered and gruesomely smoking. The two cultists on either side of the Ix'Arki lifted the poor Y'nari

to his feet but their limbs were rigid and taught. They tossed the Ix'Arki into the massive well but their body was caught in the air by the ravenously enthusiastic tentacles of the monstrosity that lurked within. Ubatt heard the nauseating sounds of tearing flesh and the wet, sloppy masticating of the unseen monstrosity as the Ix'Arki was devoured within the blackness of the well.

The chanting resumed and the two cultist returned to the cages for the next victim of their dark ritual.

It was Wist.

CHAPTER 42

THE SOUND OF THE WHISTLE SHOCKED the recruits to attention. His new yellow armour was ill-fitting as it had not been made for him. It was training day for a detachment of the fledgling city guard under the new Warlord, Owtol. A veteran of the Republican guard was instructing the recruits as to what would be expected of a city guard.

“Whistle every so often,” the veteran guard said before blowing again into the whistle for emphasis. “Frequently rush through groups of Y’nari so that citizens will think you are pursuing a criminal. They will soon connect hearing the sound of the whistle with the official actions of the city guard which should trigger a response in them simply by hearing it.”

Qel had always wanted to be a member of the city guard under the old regime but his social standing had disqualified him from service.

That was until Owtol took power.

“Make sure you are seen apprehending criminals in front of wealthy and influential Sun’Ynarr,” the veteran explained. “Their perceived safety is the reason we are here. As city guards, we cannot predict crime, we can only respond to crime. They do not understand this.”

There were only ten other recruits with them in the training lesson that *ossa*. The ten were about to start their Qi’Ar guard duties after their lesson concluded. For the past few *ossa*, Qel had been stationed at the upper residences each Qi’Ar. He found the deployment boring and tedious. All the *action* was happening in the village outside the city walls but the veteran guard, Larqos, had expressed uncertainty over whether the recruits were ready for such volatile deployments.

The professional guards of the old regime had left with the retreating officials who had originally ruled these lands. Qel was not sad to see them go.

“Citizens want regular, visible, and *personal* experiences of feeling protected by your presence,” Larqos said. “Most times, grabbing the nearest *unfortunate* and hassling them until the wealthy citizen is out of sight should work.”

“What if they stay to watch?” Qel asked, meekly raising his hand as he did.

“Well, there are bound to be unintended casualties that arise through your work with the city guard,” Larqos said. “Those in positions of power will understand this eventuality and will stand by your decisions.”

“Sometimes, it’s just fun to blow the whistle and see who runs,” a more senior guard standing behind Larqos said and they all began to laugh.

When training finished, Qel began his shift pacing the ramparts that separated the central city and the upper residences.

Ra’Quro killed Qel the recruit when he was alone. She’d had much more difficulty sneaking into the city with the extensive physical injuries she’d sustained from the Aqlut. Scaling the city walls was an awkward, slow, and painful experience. She’d had to survey the exterior of the city for most of the ossa before she was able to find a way up. The route was largely obscured from view by the dense foliage of the jungle that surrounded the city.

Ra’Quro had hung precariously to the porous stone blocks of the ramparts until Qel passed above her. She then she swung a leather strap around Qel’s neck and used his confusion and her injured momentum to jerk the recruit off his feet and over the stone blocks. The weight of Qel’s body snapped the leather taught and cracked his spine into a grotesquely unnatural position.

Qel was dead instantly.

She let his body hang there while she awkwardly

used her good arm to crawl up Qel's limp body onto the ramparts.

Eventually, she arrived at the Warlord Owtol's bedchambers. She'd had to spend extra time and attention scanning her surroundings with a crazed hyper-vigilance before her injured body snaked into Owtol's room.

She was able to search Owtol's mind as he slept for information on where Vo'dis Ka'Cyr was headed. Ra'Quro unrepentantly burnt out the Warlord's mind as she did.

CHAPTER 43

SA'TOMI HAD SLEPT FOR TWO OSSA in his new apartment. When he finally awoke, he was disoriented and hungry. He'd dreamed briefly about his family and the horrors they'd endured for his selfish choices but wakefulness had chased the memories of the dream from his mind.

There was a knock at his apartment door and he stiffened.

"My friend," a familiar voice called from the other side. "It's Evoq. I was wondering if you wanted to join me for a meal. You must be famished."

Sa'tomi rose from his warm bed and saw there were yet more clothes laid out for him on the chair across from him.

“Greetings Evoq,” Sa’tomi said groggily through the door. “I’ll be out momentarily.”

Clean clothes and a rest had done wonders for him but his body still felt dirty and sweaty. He tried to recall the last time he’d bathed and couldn’t remember.

The mess hall was next to the residences but that was still quite a trek across an ornate courtyard and Sa’tomi found himself in awe of the sheer size of Doxiq.

“I am still having a hard time believing this place is Doxiq,” Sa’tomi said as he shoveled mouthfuls of food into his ravenous maw. “How did you come to be here? Surely you didn’t venture through Ovin.”

“Correct. We did not,” Evoq said. “There was a hidden cavern beneath the sands that our A’ji saviours lead us into which housed a large energy sphere-”

“That was how we got here also,” Sa’tomi interrupted speaking through a mouthful of spiced bread and steamed vegetables. “I’ve never heard of such technology before.”

“The Oglisa speaks of the technology of *the Light-bringers* who could travel vast distances in an instant,” Evoq said proudly.

Of course it does, Sa’tomi thought but did not speak aloud and continued eating.

“I believe the A’ji have uncovered *the Light-bringers’* secrets,” Evoq pointed to the bright sands on the other side of the transparent energy wall that Sa’tomi had been too busy eating to notice.

The energy wall shimmered and hummed with a power that Sa'tomi realized must be immense for it to hold back the heat and fury of Ovin.

"The fact that we are here within the fabled city of Doxiq . . ." Evoq trailed off in awe of their surroundings. "E'om has truly blessed us."

Sa'tomi almost said something blasphemously sarcastic but actively suppressed the urge.

"Are you remembering anything at all from your past?" Evoq inquired. "A name perhaps? I can't continue calling you *you* or *friend*."

Sa'tomi hesitated but then shook his head.

"Well, we are going to need *something* to call you until you remember," Evoq said.

"What about *Ta'Satt*?" Iblik was standing beside them both and smiled.

Sa'tomi jolted in surprise and almost tossed the spiced bread in his hand across the table but caught it tightly in his fist.

Iblik pointed to the empty seat next to them.

"Please," Evoq motioned for Iblik to sit. "Why *Ta'Satt*?"

"In Genarsi, *Ta'Satt* means *Peaceful Warrior*," Iblik explained.

"That seems like a bit of a contradiction," Evoq said.

"On the contrary, in Genarsi tradition, warriors were expected to restrain from force unless it was

explicitly required. Peace is always the goal. I feel like more warriors should adopt such an attitude.”

“Ta’Satt is a wonderful name,” Evoq smiled. “What do you think?”

Sa’tomi silently continued eating but offered a weak smile in response.

“I trust you’ve been resting well,” Iblik started. “Glad to see you’re eating.”

“Our food and accommodations have been absolutely wonderful, Iblik” Evoq cooed looking up at him enthusiastically. “More than we ever could’ve hoped for.”

“You honour us with your words but *all* deserve such amenities and security,” Iblik said. “One day, the A’ji hopes all Y’nari of every race and creed can live as we do in Doxiq.”

“A noble endeavour,” Evoq said.

“Speaking of,” Iblik turned to Sa’tomi. “Ta’Satt, when you are willing, would I be able to borrow you for a discussion?”

The pace of Sa’tomi’s eating remained steady. It was performative as his hunger had long been sated and he wished to avoid conversation.

Sa’tomi simply nodded.

“Wonderful,” Iblik said and gave him directions of where to meet once *Ta’Satt* was ready to speak with him.

After Iblik left and Sa’tomi had finished pretending

to eat, Evoq brought him to where the refugees were congregating together in yet another vast open courtyard. It looked out through the energy wall at the shifting sands of Ovin beyond. Evoq began introducing Sa'tomi to the others as *Ta'Satt*.

Sa'tomi didn't correct him.

The refugees had been joined by the peasants of Korsik, freed daloqi, and many others who were all conversing with one another regardless of their socially imposed divisions. Evoq introduced Sa'tomi to one of the indigenous Sun'Ynarr named Tetokua who spoke in broken but comprehensible Tul'Ynarr.

Sa'tomi learned that Tetokua's tribe of Ix'Arki had been run out of the jungle by something called *Peace Enforcers* from the northeast who'd sold them into slavery. What remained of Tetokua's tribe had too been liberated by the A'ji. They were easily convinced to join the A'ji in the fight against the oppressive Aq'Adezeans and the invading Tulean Imperium.

Overwhelmed and overstimulated, Sa'tomi planned to excuse himself from the courtyard but quietly asked Evoq where he would find a bath before he did. Evoq directed him to a palatial complex of multi-tiered baths of varying temperatures. He chose the hottest of the baths available.

Exhausted, Sa'tomi returned to his apartment, clean and warm, where he instantly curled into his bed.

He quickly fell asleep.

The next ossa, Waqir kicked open the door to Sa'tomi's apartment and blew hard into a whistle that emitted a nauseatingly offensive shrieking sound that was more aggressively intense within the walls of his apartment.

"Iblik requests your presence," Waqir laughed and then clomped away before Sa'tomi could respond.

Iblik was waiting in a room deep within Doxiq where most others seemed not to be allowed. Sa'tomi had to pass two levels of A'ji guards who waved him along when they saw he was accompanying Waqir before finally arriving at the briefing room.

"Welcome Ta'Satt," Iblik said when they entered the room.

The Genarsi that Sa'tomi had travelled with were all seated around tables facing Iblik except for one. The Y'nari who'd been injured in their tumble down the escarpment was conspicuously absent.

"We need someone . . . *peaceful* to assist us," Iblik said.

Iblik explained how the *sand demons* were actually specialized A'ji. They would infiltrate Aq'Adezean settlements. First, to poison their drinking water with a hallucinogenic that would render the inhabitants incapacitated. Then, a few ossa later, the sand demons would returned again to carry out whatever strategic goals their mission required.

Their current mission tasked them with returning

to the city whose well the A'ji had poisoned earlier; Iblik was calling it Aq'Yri. *Ta'Satt* was asked to take the place of the injured Genarsi within the party of sand demons for the upcoming raid.

Sa'tomi hesitantly agreed to accompany the sand demons as long as the raid would indeed be peaceful. Iblik set out the objectives of the raid, which specifically focused on targets important to the military supply chain of Aq'Adezean Republic forces. Sa'tomi looked over at Waqir. There was something in his expression that Sa'tomi read as silent displeasure at the lack of violence this mission would require.

The raid was set for later that Qi'Ar.

As a precaution, or so Iblik had said, Sa'tomi was taught how to use ancient ceremonial energy weapons called *josts*. He was given his own shrieking whistle. He turned it around in his hand. The disgust on his face was visible. The unmistakable sound had been seared into his ear drums such that he could imagine the sound in his mind as if he were already blowing hard into it.

Waqir smashed both fists onto the table in front of him and screamed aggressively: "To me, my *sand demons*."

CHAPTER 44

KEROSI WATCHED FOR THE SILHOUETTES of the sand demons within the churning winds of the sandstorm. She squinted and covered her face against the gusts of grit that sprayed through the wooden railing of the balcony she knelt behind. Below her, villagers and tourists were erratically scurrying about, back and forth, as they screamed at one another about the shrieking sand demons they could hear approaching within the raging sandstorm.

No one noticed Kerosi on the balcony above them.

The shrieking of the sand demons was growing closer. There were bright bursts of light and heat as the sand demons set fire to buildings throughout Aq'Yri. Their focus seemed to be an area of the city housing

stockpiles of grain and other goods. The barracks on the other side of the large granary erupted in a massive explosion that knocked Kerosi off her knees. Below her, many of the terrified Y'nari were sent flying by the shock wave. When she sat up again she saw an angry mushroom cloud rising from the barracks and squinted against the spray of grit from the sandstorm.

Sand demons appeared at the end of the street. All but one were stoically rigid while they watched the singular sand demon maniacally cackle while launching bright bursts of fire. Seemingly from their fists. Residents who'd been hiding in their homes to escape the chaos were left with no choice other than to flee their burning homes. The cackling sand demon shot bolts of flame at them as they fled. Engulfing the terrified Y'nari as they scurried for safety. Many dropped to the sands where they flailed, shrieked, and wailed as the flames consumed them.

Another sand demon came charging out from one of the side alleys. He shout at the other who was wantonly setting the city ablaze and targeting terrified citizens.

The sand demon took off their helmet to scream angrily at the other and Kerosi gasped. For a moment, something about the sand demon without his helmet reminded her of Bokis.

The maniacal sand demon continued launching bursts of flame from their fists as the other raced up behind to tackle them.

The sand demon who resembled Bokis tore the other's helmet off. Kerosi could make out the surprise and confusion in the other sand demon's face when the one who resembled Bokis began striking him again and again. The sand demons further down the street remained silently watching the two fight from a distance. The once maniacal sand demon dazedly swatted at the one who resembled Bokis but none of their strikes landed cleanly.

"I'll kill you, Ta'Satt!" The dazed sand demon screamed at the other but couldn't bring himself to stand upright. "You're dead!"

He was swaying awkwardly like a newborn nun'bak that was just learning to use their legs.

Eventually, the battle ended when the sand demon the other had called Ta'Satt landed a blow with a sickening crack that Kerosi could hear clearly from her hiding spot above them.

Ta'Satt began walking back to the other sand demons down who had not moved from their place at the end of the street since the altercation began.

"Traitor," the injured sand demon wheezed as Ta'Satt stepped away. "I'll make sure you pay for this with your life!"

Ta'Satt stopped dead. He paused slightly before turning back to face the fallen sand demon. He raised his arm and, this close, Kerosi could see the weapon in Ta'Satt's hand begin to charge with a bright glow

before a visceral pop followed by a burst of flame that rushed toward the downed sand demon.

Instantly, the sand demon's body was consumed in intense flames that licked up hungrily at the underside of the balcony Kerosi had been using for protection. The sand demon shrieked and flailed; curing Ta'Satt as he burned.

Ta'Satt rejoined the others at the end of the street where they had a short conversation that Kerosi was too far away to hear. Ta'Satt continued past them and the group of silent sand demons slowly followed behind him as they left the burning city.

Kerosi raced back into the room Iwa and Surai had rented for her. She grabbed Qera's backpack and swung it over her shoulder before sprinting down the stairs and running out into the street. She managed to glimpse Ta'Satt and the other sand demons just before they were lost in the chaos of the flames. Hugged low to the ground, Kerosi followed a distance behind them. There was nothing for her to hide behind as she stalked the sand demons through the sandstorm, which seemed to be centred around them somehow.

One of the sand demons in the centre of the group had their arms raised above their shoulders. Their hands were emitting a dull glow. When they finally reached the other side of the valley, the sandstorm dissipated. She noticed the sand demon in the centre of the group had lowered their arms and their hands were

no longer glowing.

None of the sand demons had looked back as they'd made their way into one of the many caves that dotted the slope of the escarpment. When Kerosi entered the cave behind them, the sand demons were much closer and she could make out their voices.

They were speaking Tulean.

"What are we going to say happened to Waqir?" A frazzled voice asked.

"Tell them I killed him," Ta'Satt's voice answered. "I don't care."

"*They* will care," a different voice said.

The sand demons continued to talk as they ventured into one of the interior tunnels that seemed to be glowing an unnatural blue. Their voices became muffled and then abruptly cut out completely. She followed the blue glow to a dead end where a mysterious sphere of energy was humming ominously. On the other side of the skin of the energy sphere was an impossible courtyard. She could see that sand demons within the sphere were walking across the courtyard that was somehow more expansive than the mysterious blue energy sphere yet at the same time was contained within.

Kerosi entered the energy sphere behind the sand demons. Immediately, the damp, musty smell of the tunnels was replaced with a crisp, clean scent reminiscent of the halls of the Azai Grand Library.

She was instantly noticed.

“Kerosi!” Tetokua’s surprised face welcomed her.

He raced towards her and threw his arms around her in a warm hug.

Surprised, she flinched as she confusedly scanned her surroundings.

It can’t be.

She considered absurd thoughts for a moment about where she currently was but Tet interrupted her with a myriad of questions before she could bring her thoughts to any conclusion.

“Tet, you’re a *sand demon*?” Kerosi asked.

Tet gave her a confused look but, before he could answer, more Y’nari gathered in close and a voice spoke.

A voice she somehow recognized.

“Kerosi?” The Y’nari introduced themselves as Iblik.

He’d been there in Korsik when she killed that noble who’d murdered Tela. He’d given her the blue amulet in the shape of an eye.

“I am,” she said staring into Iblik’s eyes.

She was having a hard time deciphering if he was glad to see her or not.

“It’s her!” Another Y’nari shouted.

A crowd continued to amass around her. Within it, there were faces she recognized. She saw Aertos who was a few Os her senior at the Azai Grand Library. There was another named Bo’Kan who’d lived a few apartments down from her back on the island. More and more Y’nari joined the crowd and suddenly they

began chanting her name.

When the spectacle ended, Iblik invited her to an empty apartment in the residential section of what Kerosi was now convinced was the ancient A'ua'ki city of Doxiq. Exactly *how* it was they were in Doxiq she still couldn't understand. He offered her clean clothes and let her know where she could find the mess hall when she became hungry. He left her to acclimatize herself to her new surroundings but added that he would like to speak with her once she had the energy.

"May I speak with Ta'Satt?" Kerosi inquired.

Iblik seemed shocked at first and then amused. He explained that he would arrange a meeting with Ta'Satt and get back to her.

Tet stopped by her apartment the next ossa and profusely apologized once again for the way he and his tribe of Ix'Arki had treated her.

He explained how, shortly after Kerosi had been expelled, the Ix'Arki themselves were chased from their lands. Tet was convinced the catalyst for his tribe's destruction had been their mistreatment of her.

"We angered the gods with our transgressions toward you," Tet was beginning to say but Kerosi dismissed his superstitions with a smile.

"I hold no ill-will toward you, Tet," she said, touching his arm.

"You speak Ix'Arki?" Iblik said, fascinatingly observing their exchange.

“I do,” Kerosi said.

“You, my dear, are a treasure,” Iblik said. “You are the one who started the riot that brought life back to the A’ji insurgency. Your act of rebellion encouraged other Azai refugees to join the A’ji.”

The A’ji leadership had taken note of her presence within Doxiq. She was introduced to the inner circle of the A’ji and quietly listened to the officials explain the history of their insurgency to her and their goals for Aq’Adez.

She kept stealing glances at the one they called Ta’Satt.

Close up, Ta’Satt no longer resembled Bokis save for their similar builds and kind eyes that stared out from behind gruff exteriors.

The A’ji leadership explained how a majority of the old guard of their insurgency had recently been assassinated in an Aq’Adezean military strike. Senior A’ji members had been holding strategy meetings within their old headquarters. Those A’ji who survived had uncovered a way to access Doxiq and were now using the lost city as their new base of operations.

There was a period of rest where all Kerosi’s needs were meticulously attended to. She was observed by healers when they found her malnourished and mentally exhausted. They instituted a health regimen to alleviate her negative symptoms.

She spent ossa just walking around Doxiq taking

in the ancient city she still couldn't believe existed. She stared out at the baked wastes of Ovin beyond the city's shimmering energy field.

She saw and grew accustomed to how the A'ji resistance cared for all within Doxiq regardless of their race or station.

She met with A'ji scribes, scholars, and officials who enthusiastically showed off the epic record vault within Doxiq.

She found herself almost happy.

Instantly, she realized that original manuscripts of the copied books the Imperium had burned when they sacked the Azai capitol must still exist. They would be stored within a structure deep within Qisaq like the vault here in Doxiq. Then she recognized that, if both structures were made by the same Y'nari, the Azai capitol was much older than she'd been led to believe. *That* or Qisaq was built atop the older complex which had been omitted from the history of the Azai.

She still hadn't found an opportunity to speak with the sand demon the others were calling Ta'Satt.

One ossa, when she'd been speaking with Iblik, she'd seen a creature on the other side of Doxiq's energy field scurrying through the sands. It had a thick, rigid carapace that shielded it from the intense focused heat of Ovin. The creature had a beauty that made Kerosi want to open wide the protection of the field to allow it inside with them.

However, she instantly recalled how wealthy, ignorant Azai had caused the destruction of an entire generation of creatures that were taken to Qisaq as pets. They'd failed to understand how a part of that particular creature's life-cycle was to travel to specific deep lakes on the Aq'Adezean mainland to vent a compressed gas held within sacks within their bodies. The pressure of the water at the bottom of the lakes would safely expell the gas from the creatures. All of the captive creatures on the Azai islands burst. Dying horrifically when they were unable to vent their gas effectively. It was only much later that an Azai scientist discovered the physiological reason behind the creatures' seemingly spontaneous combustion.

"The hubris of thinking we could just snatch creatures from the wild and keep them for ourselves without knowing anything of their physiology other than their aesthetically pleasing appearance," Kerosi said after recounting the story to Iblik.

"Only the vain and foolhardy believe they know all. The mark of an intellectual is that they are aware that there are things they don't even know they don't know," Iblik said.

Well fed, safe and warm, Kerosi isolated herself in the epic record vault reading from a tome she'd once believed had been lost to time about the Wu'jikarr monks of the Feros Woods until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 45

VO'DIS KA'CYR HAD CONSISTENT NIGHTMARES of her indoctrination at the hands of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos. She felt a dark nostalgia for the Os of dreamless sleep she found preferable to the terror of Qi'Ar since rediscovering dreams. They revealed lost memories of Destim that made her question her perception of him. She quickly realized that something was out of place about her 'tonic' as no one else had seemed to be required to take it but her. She wondered why she hadn't questioned it before.

To distract herself, Ka'Cyr listened for the names of all of the soldiers under her. The recruits had opened up to the mercenaries added to their party as they walked across Aq'Adez in search of the erosikai and the

elusive Grokix assassin. Ka'Cyr listened quietly to their conversations. She began to learn about the remaining soldiers in her unit as individual Y'nari and overheard stories of those they'd already lost. Emotions of every kind and intensity fought one another for her attention. She was finding it hard to control her mood with any consistency. It was if she hadn't truly had emotions before and she'd been sort of sleepwalking through her life. At first, she'd been trying to uncover the soldiers' names out of spite so the young recruits could no longer say that she did not know them. Hearing them converse with one another, she came to know them as individual Y'nari. She felt shame for her dismissive attitude she'd held towards them and to the soldiers who'd died throughout their journey.

Rin, Beqit, Wulo, Kaz, and the runaway Tolik were gone. Only Eqloss, Pynz, Bocalt, Uz'O, Rawlq, Woan, Tinoz, Ca'Ellor, and En'Taqarr remained.

They passed the smouldering remnants of a settlement at the edge of the jungle before the lush greenery once again became a baked expanse of sand. They pressed on through the dunes stopping only to set up camp each Qi'Ar to sleep but were up again the moment Mōt pierced the horizon.

An ancient ship, half submerged in the sands, cast a long shadow across the party as they neared. They were ossa from the coast and the sheer size of the ship fascinated Ka'Cyr as to how it had come to rest there.

As if reading her mind, one of the mercenaries answered: “These sands were once the bottom of an ancient sea until the Warlord, Gozarr, dammed up the water coming down from the mountains in the north. Now, we call this place *the Vast Depression*.”

Part of her wanted to investigate the seemingly impossible ship trapped within the sands but anxious thoughts about her mission prodded her along. Her brain buzzed with a charged cacophony of competing thoughts. The only way she could think to quiet them was to push ahead.

Owtol had provided them with water and rations but crossing the sands was taking longer than she’d anticipated.

They were almost out of water when the sands descended even lower into a valley where an unusual grove of fat, oddly spaced trees penetrated upward. At the centre of the unusual grove was an oasis which the thirsty travellers raced to drink from. Ka’Cyr walked cautiously behind, taking in the irrationality of these bizarre trees so far into the sand sea. The water they found was viscous and hot; like saliva.

Egloss spat out the substance and rubbed his tongue on his dusty sleeve before falling to his knees and vomiting.

“Great E’om, what is that?” Rawlq choked.

Beside Ka’Cyr, one of the oddly spaced trees began vibrating. It emitted an unnerving squelching sound

Ka'Cyr could hear from behind it's bark. More of the bizarre trees began vibrating and soon the entire grove was buzzing and squelching ominously.

Members of the party crouching around the thick, salty water of the oasis cautiously rose upright. One of the mercenaries gasped in surprise as the bark of the nearest tree abruptly split open vertically. Revealing moist muscle and sinew beneath. The bark slid down the moist, exposed muscle and disappeared into the sand leaving the wet, glistening meat of the bizarre tree's core to sway and curl in the hot desert air. The long tentacle of moist muscle had a thin coating of white, sickly discharge that the mercenary reached out to touch curiously. The white discharge began to move, slither, and coalesce around the mercenary's hand. Fusing it to the tentacle. He tried to pull his hand away with a quick jerk but quickly became hysterical when his hand would not disengage. He began frantically yanking to free himself.

Beside them, the oasis began gurgling and bubbling as the liquid started to drain. The tentacles snapped out towards the party, wrapping their sticky appendages around any arms, legs, and torsos of those unfortunate to be within reach. The tentacles pulled their thrashing prey along the sands toward the oasis. As it drained, left behind was the gaping, toothy throat of an absolutely massive monstrosity.

"Run!" Ka'Cyr screamed but recognized only too

late that many of her party were already ensnared by the monstrosity's tentacles or were too far within the deceptive grove to escape their reach.

At the edges of the grove of tentacles, four plates began to emerge from the sands. Bocalt was shrieking and wailing for help as the tentacles pulled him towards the throat of the monstrosity.

Ka'Cyr rushed toward Eqloss who was closest to her. Before she could reach him, a moist, sticky tentacle had wrapped around Eqloss' head and neck. Yanking him off his feet. Ka'Cyr stretched out for one of his legs but was just beyond the grasp of her fingers.

The plates continued to rise and then began to press together into a beak. Entombing the terrified Y'nari within. Their hysterical screams crescendoed frantically before becoming muffled as the beak snapped shut tightly. White discharge oozed out from the seams where the four plates touched. The beak began to vibrate and shake as it slid into the sands before disappearing completely leaving only a slight depression to show the monstrous oasis had ever been there at all.

Those who survived were left panting and shaking with terror. Ka'Cyr surveyed the sands to find Eqloss, her navigator, had been eaten along with all the maps of the region he'd been carrying with him on his pack. Woan, Bocalt, and Rawlq were not among the survivors nor were half of Owtol's mercenaries.

The remaining members of her seemingly doomed

expedition (Pynz, Tinoz, Ca'Ellor, En'Taqarr, and the final four mercenaries) had little time to grieve or plan their next move except to shamble behind Ka'Cyr in the vague direction of the erosikai.

Two ossa later, they finally reached the edge of the sand sea and entered what one of the four remaining mercenaries had called *the Land of Bridges*.

The irrigation infrastructure (created in the time of Warlord Gozarr with his massive dam) birthed many winding rivers that snaked across the land. Allowing for grassy hills and vast fields of farmland to sprout from an otherwise inhospitable desert in the spaces between rivers. Stretched out before them, ancient and ornate bridges connected the land. The view was beautiful but Ka'Cyr could not rip her mind away from the images of the toothy throat of the tentacled monstrosity.

The tired, thirsty, weary procession of travellers did not drink from the first river they encountered. Instead, they waited until they crossed a number of bridges before cautiously testing the waters. When they each were confident the water truly was water, they began drinking wantonly from the river.

Ka'Cyr looked up often to scan her surrounding for anything that could be considered hostile or dangerous. She noticed there was a large mechanical wheel in the centre of the river a ways upstream. The wheel was attached by a long horizontal pole to a system of pulleys, wires, and ropes that allowed it to be extended out into

the river and retracted again at will. The wires and ropes slithered back to an aged structure on the shore where smoke was rising from the chimney.

The home belonged to a strange hermit who was already shuffling out to greet them. He was pleasant and oddly jovial. He did not treat them with suspicion nor hostility but instead welcomed them into his home with a gentle friendliness and an unnerving familiarity. The interior of the hermit's home was overflowing with tomes and scrolls. Many were splayed out among the many sparking experiments that Ka'Cyr and the others had no context for. Hanging on the wall were ancient metal fragments which looked like disconnected body parts. An arm, a torso, and a skull. The fragments began to move as Ka'Cyr neared and she recoiled.

"Don't let Widoh startled you," the hermit said.

"Widoh?" Ka'Cyr repeated.

"YES, MY NAME," the skull moved and emitted an unusual sound. The voice spoke in comprehensible Tulean but sounded wholly unnatural.

The travellers stared confusedly at one another.

"I AM A K'YU," Widoh said. "MY NAME IS WIDOH."

The hermit explained how Widoh, or what was left of him, was assisting him with his experiments. The hermit had technology recovered from the same ruins nearby where he'd first rescued Widoh from untold Os of silence.

Open on one of the tables, Ka'Cyr saw an old map

that placed ruins in the same location where Destim and Owtol had said the erosikai was expected to be.

The hermit told her not to venture there under any circumstances.

“The ruins belong to the cult now!”

He explained how he’d once been a part of some kind of cult but did not elaborate. He’d escaped his cult after they’d been attacked by a group of Obloxos further west.

“The cult takes your mind from you,” he said with crazed eyes.

The Obloxos attack had disconnected the hermit from the control of the cult and he’d chosen to use his reacquired agency to flee.

“The cult has taken up residence in those A’ua’ki ruins,” the hermit said tapping aggressively on the dot that marked the ruins on the aged map. “They are performing dark rituals to revive the god of chaos.”

She wondered if the erosikai would even still be there if this cult now called the ruins home. She wished she could pinpoint the location of the erosikai itself. Then, her gaze fell on rare reagents she would need for a more specialized (and intense) location spell hanging from a dusty rack within the hermit’s shelter. She asked the jovial hermit for the reagents while also taking care not to reveal the true reason she desired them. The hermit shrugged and willingly gave Ka’Cyr the reagents she requested. The hermit let them stay

the Qi'Ar and gave them food before they left at the first light of Mōt.

When they next made camp, Ka'Cyr set out all the required reagents for her much more intense location spell. It required her to slice open her forearm and insert Destim's piece of the erosikai she'd retrieved from his charred body after he'd died. He'd been carrying the slice of erosikai he'd acquired from other Grokix back in Nesoq for continued use in his earlier, far less intrusive, location spell.

Ka'Cyr's location spell, however, was violently explosive. It shocked and frightened the remaining soldiers and mercenaries who worried Ka'Cyr had been gravely injured. While a spectacle, and indeed painful, Ka'Cyr was left relatively unharmed if only visibly sore and exhausted.

By Qi'Air, she could viscerally feel the presence of the erosikai and the direction in which she needed to travel. Unfortunately, the feeling was directing the party west. Back the way they'd come. She could sense the exact location of the erosikai as if part of her was physically there beside it and she only needed to connect back with that version of herself a ways northwest from where Destim had been buried. Where they'd first encountered the Obloxos.

The confused, tired party had rumblings of apprehension about backtracking such a far distance, but still, they followed Ka'Cyr; returning to the sands.

CHAPTER 46

Y'NARI HAD BEGUN RECOGNIZING KEROSI with such frequency that she could no longer venture around Doxiq. Whenever she did, she was accosted with bizarre and intrusive questions, sycophantic praise, and an almost cult-like adoration. It made her very uncomfortable.

When she'd recognized some Azai survivors of the Imperium invasion, she'd asked if they had any news about her father. Sombrely, she they revealed that her father had been one of the those unfortunate souls who'd been selected to be buried up to their heads on the beach of the marina; left to the tides and the creatures on the shore. The surviving Azai recounted how they'd been forced to watch helplessly from their fortifications

in the cliffs while those on the beach drowned or were devoured. The survivors did eventually make it to the mainland only to find it aggressively unfriendly. They were instantly ostracized by the local populations.

The survivors explained to Kerosi how, after the uprising in Korsik, many Azai on the mainland were murdered on sight. The stories were so horrific that Kerosi could think of nothing else for ossa afterward as she believed her actions in Korsik must have been the catalyst for the extreme violence that rippled outward across Aq'Adez.

The Ix'Arki guide, Tet, followed her like a shadow. His exuberant desire to make amends for his tribe's treatment of her was bordering on obsessive. She made conscious efforts to avoid him. Iblik noticed and arranged to move Kerosi to an apartment in the upper residences behind an A'ji checkpoint where movement for the majority of refugees was restricted. Iblik showed Kerosi more of Doxiq's colossal library, which dwarfed the Azai Grand Library. Histories told of the immensity of *the Library of Doxiq* but physically being there was overwhelming.

Kerosi spent an entire senix in the book-stacks. Iblik had attendants bring her food when he realized she'd prioritized reading over nutrition. She found a copy of *the Crimson Insurrection of Grix* that predated the one which she herself had copied and now carried with her in Qera's backpack. Kerosi was able to switch

back and forth between the two.

Iblik came to speak with her often while she sat in the book-stacks. They talked about censorship and propaganda and how she found the omissions, deletions, and additions to the respective versions equally fascinating and horrifying. Together they ruminated on the political, religious, and cultural reasons for the disparities between the versions.

There was a whole section in the older text that chronicled an adventure in which Grix had joined forces with the deity, *Sug’ogg*, to bring down one of the floating islands of the A’ua’ki with the help of a party of time-traveling Y’nari. This story had been omitted completely for the version of the text that Kerosi had eventually copied. The tone of the original writings were more meandering with allegorical interludes that folded into the larger narrative. These asides added flavour but were largely unnecessary for the central story so Kerosi understood why the content had been removed for the more scholarly document her version of *the Crimson Insurrection of Grix* would become later on.

Gradually, Iblik began to encourage her to leave the Library to see more of what Doxiq had to offer. He revealed to her some of the mechanics behind the technology that allowed them to traverse from location to location instantaneously. Iblik invited Kerosi to a large meeting room where a massive mural spanned the

whole wall behind them. There were many large circles connected by long, black lines. There were blinking lights within some of the circles but other circles were dark. She realized the mural was a massive map of the *classical boundaries* of Asmita which bled into Vol in the north and Ovin in the south. Iblik gave Kerosi a short introduction to the purpose of the map.

“These circles are sites around Asmita that have ancient A’ua’ki complexes such as Doxiq,” Iblik said. “The circles that are lit indicate that we can access them through our transporter network. The circles that are dark are locations we cannot.”

“And the lines?”

“See these lines connecting Doxiq to *this* other site?” Iblik asked pointing to a site that looked like it should be in northern Tul near the present day city of Eq’Olax.

Kerosi nodded.

“We cannot jump straight *there* from Doxiq,” Iblik started. “Instead, we need to travel from Doxiq to another site *here*, which then will transport us to the site in northern Tul.”

“Cumbersome,” Kerosi said.

“Indeed,” Iblik smiled. “Those who know more than I about such things have told me that only a fraction of the ancient transporter network is operational at the moment but this mural has been invaluable in pinpointing where we need to be looking for sites to

activate.”

“Activate?” Kerosi inquired.

“Let me start at the beginning,” Iblik said. “The original discovery of the transporter technology was largely by accident. The previous headquarters of the A’ji had been deep within underground ruins, which had been a Genarsi secret for generations. We uncovered lost technology hidden within the ruins we were only just beginning to understand. The A’ji recruited scientists, architects, and historians to decipher the mysteries held within. After some time, the A’ji were able to activate these energy spheres that held different locations within them. Many in the resistance were hesitant about tampering with such technology but our hands were forced when our A’ji insurgency was betrayed. Our location was exposed to the Aq’Adezean Republic. They raided our ruins. They killed many of the senior members of our insurgency. Those of us who survived were the first to *practically* test the transporter; arriving here in Doxiq.”

Iblik explained how, after the survivors had made it safely to Doxiq, they’d severed the connection to the fallen ruins on their end so that the Aq’Adezean forces could not follow.

“Thankfully, Doxiq still has access to many other transporters across Asmita and Ovin,” Iblik said.

“Are we connected to Vol?” Kerosi asked.

“Unfortunately no,” Iblik sighed. “There are many

dark spaces on this mural that we still need to activate. There are rumours of a master hub that exists in the Labyrinth of Ur'Bos, *the Seri Ambosi*, that would connect to many more sites than we currently have access to."

Iblik explained how a transporter location that had been active until very recently and had since gone dark. They were currently working to determine exactly why. Iblik believed a group of fanatics, called the Sansarcs, had been actively destroying ruins across Aq'Adez for bizarre religious reasons and were likely the culprits of the disconnection. An expedition was preparing to venture to the disconnected ruins to investigate further.

Kerosi went back to the book-stacks to read until Iblik found her asleep on the cold marble. He suggested Kerosi take documents back to her apartment to read there. He gathered together a few Y'nari to help Kerosi haul the heaps of documents, tomes, and scrolls to her apartment. There she read a collection of A'ua'ki folktales, which had been compiled by an Y'nari historian from what was then Kent. One of the folktales was an allegory about *belonging* and *otherness* featuring the mechanical K'yu.

While she lost herself in the ancients text, Te'a continued on until Iblik returned again to visit her. She could tell that he wanted something from her. He revealed to her that a contact he had within *the Aq'Adezean Academy of Antiquities* had provided them with a recently discovered document that allegedly

revealed the location of the Seri Ambosi within the Labyrinth of Ur'Bos.

An early investigation by the A'ji found the text indecipherable. There were large blank spaces that were conspicuously out of place for such a document. Kerosi recognized why immediately. They were only *part* of the document. The missing information was there but was currently invisible. The writing on the document could only be revealed when brushed with a very specific solution. It was a trick employed during the Warlord era by *the Shadows in the Darkness* to discretely transport sensitive documents through enemy territory where there was a significant danger of interception by Warlord forces. The ingredients required to reveal the invisible ink were fairly common except for one. Bright orange sap from an Eazol tree that could only be found in a specific region in Aq'Adez.

"Is that all?" Iblik laughed. "It's fortuitous that the most difficult to obtain of the ingredients we need can be found on our way to the disabled transporter."

"Fortuitous," Kerosi said flatly.

Iblik fumbled around asking the question directly but Kerosi knew.

"You want me to come along on the expedition they are planning to reconnect the transporter?"

"We'll take the transporter to the location nearest the one disconnected by the Sansarcs," Iblik explained. "From there, we walk the rest of the way. It will take

us through the Loeqarr Woods where we'll find Eazol trees."

She'd cautiously agreed but began to regret her decision when she found Tet eagerly sitting in the briefing room. The rest of the expedition included Iblik, a number of the sand demons whom she recognized but whose names she did not know, and Ta'Satt.

Iblik assured them that the expedition would be "routine" and "an easy introduction" for Kerosi as the Sansarcs were believed to be non-violent.

After the private briefing, Iblik led them out to a courtyard where a crowd was waiting. An official, more senior than Iblik, presented the large crowd with a truncated version of the briefing she'd just received. Ta'Satt was announced as the new leader of the sand demons while Waqir was given a flashy and inaccurate eulogy by Iblik.

Kerosi could not tell if Iblik was knowingly lying to the crowd or if he'd merely been misinformed by his superiors about what kind of Y'nari Waqir had shown himself to be.

After the public briefing and before they left on their expedition, Kerosi kept trying to gather up the courage to speak with Ta'Satt but even when she finally did she was unable to find an opportunity to do so privately.

CHAPTER 47

VO'DIS KA'CYN AND HER PARTY AVOIDED the jungle, and the Aqlut within, after making their way back across *the Vast Depression*. Instead, they caressed the northern edge of the tree-line until they found a heavily travelled road connecting them to the trade route that would take them to where Ka'Cyr could sense the presence of the erosikai. Some of the frantic urgency that had once propelled her forward had bled from her mind now that she could *feel* the location of the artifact through the steady pulsing of the shard beneath the skin of her forearm. A certain kind of calmness descended upon her. The party rested more frequently and stayed in camp just a little longer before resuming their trek each ossa.

They had to be cautious around a particular section of the trade route when one of the mercenaries spied a large contingent of the Aq'Adezean Republic army off in the distance marching west toward them. They saw the contingent with enough time to conceal themselves within the environment until the soldiers passed.

Ka'Cyr was delighted to see the sands disappear behind them as the ground became solid once again. The dunes became the rolling hills of the A'Yrr lowlands before rising up in the distance to become the imposing A'Yrr Mountain range. The air thinned the higher they climbed. The closer to the mountains they ventured, the stronger the shard pulsed beneath her skin.

It was another senix before they would arrive at the ruins but the pulsing had become so intense that she could not sleep when they made camp. The bare hills of the lowlands grew into lush, towering forests against the mountainside. It had begun to rain causing their pace to slow. Their boots sunk into the wet soil as they clomped upward in the direction her pulsing forearm beckoned.

They reached a clearing at the peak of the trail that looked over a hidden valley overgrown with grasses and wild flowers. On the other side of the valley, Ka'Cyr could see the wide road that meandered upward toward A'ua'ki ruins whose aged spires poked out from the forest that had slowly moved in to reclaim them over the many Os of isolation.

They spent the Qi'Ar at the peak overlooking the clearing where Ka'Cyr tried to use a secret Sen'Daris Er'Ebos ritual that should force her body to rest.

Within her artificial sleep, she dreamed of a wu'jikarr temple. She was sure it was a memory and not an illusion. In her dream, she was a child. There was another ur'ka younger than herself.

Someone she had to leave behind.

She dreamed of her abduction from the temple, her trek to Tul after the raid, and of being raised as a violent, brutal Sen'Daris Er'Ebos acolyte instead of a benevolent Wu'jikarr monk. The crystal shard in her arm pulsed with a powerful energy. She could feel it pairing with a kind of *sister energy* emanating from deep within the ruins on the other side of the valley.

She shot upright from her bedroll. Sweating and panting. The ground began to shake. Ka'Cyr rolled away from the embers of the campfire and leapt to her feet. There was an ominous groaning and cracking that seemed to be coming from deep within the ground.

"De'Otos!" One of the mercenaries gasped and fell to their knees in reverence before the others joined in.

"Our intrusion has angered *the Witch of Flame*," one of the mercenaries wailed.

Ka'Cyr scoffed.

They waited for the ground to shake again while they closed up camp but it did not. They began walking across the valley. The party had to carefully watch

their feet for what remained of the many stone walls hiding within the tall swaying grasses and clusters of fragrant flowers and ferns. The remnants of entire villages had been obscured from view and Ka'Cyr found herself wondering what the valley would have looked like at the height of the De'Nosi kingdom's power and influence. She knew the ancient tales of *the Witch of Flame* well. As a young ur'ka in the Imperium's Pod'ka-centric society, Ka'Cyr had often fantasized about wielding that kind of power herself.

When they finally arrived at the ruins, Ka'Cyr instantly sensed something was amiss. There were deep marks carved into the dirt path before them. Many large carts had transported something very heavy to the ruins slicing deep divots into the tacky soil leading inside.

Once again, the ground shook. The pulsing of the shard in her arm became an intensely painful throbbing. She could feel the presence of many angry and confused beings whom she couldn't yet see but knew were charging out towards them from deep within the dark ruins.

CHAPTER 48

KEROSI WAS GIVEN SAND DEMON ARMOUR that the A'ji had taken time and care to size and tailor specifically to her body. She was given the documents with the clandestine message, which she secured within a leather-bound tube on her back. As well, she carried a satchel of reagents she would eventually need to mix with the rare tree sap to reveal the ancient document's hidden messages.

Ta'Satt, Tet, Iblik, and the rest of the A'ji expedition passed through the portal in Doxiq to step out into a chamber within unfamiliar A'ua'ki ruins. Iblik led them out to the surface which Kerosi realized was a castle from the time of the Biqarrs and the outset of the Warlord Period. This castle was perched on the

highlands of the southern slopes of the A'Yrr Mountains peering down over Aq'Adez.

She saw Tet looking despondently out at the jungle below them. From their location, they could clearly see the territory that had once belonged to his tribe of the Ix'Arki. A huge, oddly coloured wound had been carved from jungle. It sliced a corridor through the dense jungle from the west, straight through to the sand sea on the other side.

"These monsters defile our sacred jungle," Tet sighed sadly.

"There it is," Iblik pointed to the mountains in the northwest.

Kerosi squinted. She could almost make out the silhouettes of structures within the trees on the mountainside.

"It doesn't look that far," one of the sand demons commented.

Iblik explained that, despite *appearing* close, impassible vertical cliffs separated them from their destination. In order to reach the disconnected ruins, they would have to walk down the mountain a ways before then following a different path back up on the other side of the vertical cliffs.

"I know you killed Waqir," Kerosi whispered to Ta'Satt when only the two of them could hear.

Sa'tomi didn't respond.

"I would've done the same thing," she said. "I saw

him killing civilians. It seemed to delight him. He was not the kind of Y'nari that should be allowed to remain alive."

Sa'tomi remained silent.

"Thank you, Ta'Satt," Kerosi said.

He looked at her; surprised and confused.

"Your actions made me feel as though you were safe to follow," Kerosi said. "If I *hadn't* followed you, I'd still be wandering around Aq'Adez oblivious to the existence of Doxiq, the A'ji, and the transporters. I would not have spent much of the past urix reading documents that I'd thought were lost to time. Most importantly, I would not have known what became of my father. Thank you."

Sa'tomi nodded quietly to her. He opened his mouth briefly like he was about to say something but then pursed it shut.

There was a thick grove of Eazol trees just south of the intersection where they needed to pivot back north into the mountains. She collected the rare sap in triple the quantity they would need to coax the knowledge from the secret sections of the ancient document into becoming visible.

An aged signpost rose from the dirt at the intersection.

"De'Otos!" Kerosi gasped. "We're heading to the ancient seat of power of the De'Nosi?"

"The realm of *the Witch of Flame*," Iblik said. "We are, yes."

De'Otos had been the capital city of the kingdom of the De'Nosi during the Warlord Period.

Os ago, Kerosi had copied a history that chronicled the events of the rise of *the Witch of Flame* and the annihilation of the Biqarrs in a tome called '*the Divine Vengeance of the Witch of Flame*'.

Traditionally, the De'Nosi had always had a particularly complicated relationship with their eastern neighbours: the Biqarrs. They occasionally fought alongside them against the many upstart Warlords vying for power in the surrounding lands. The De'Nosi were considerably more powerful and influential than the Biqarrs and so had forced their lessers to pay tribute for their continued protection.

The Biqarrs were resentful of this arrangement.

When the De'Nosi ruler died, the Biqarrs used the opportunity to halt all payments of tribute. For a time, the new ruler of the De'Nosi allowed the Biqarrs to withhold their protection money. Instead, opting to focus on mourning their deceased ruler, Brasos, erecting monuments in his memory. Brasos' son, Doso, reigned twenty Os before personally traveling to the Biqarrs to collect the delinquent protection money they owed. When the Biqarrs finally presented the tribute to the new De'Nosi ruler, Doso decreed that the cost of the tribute had since doubled.

Enraged, the Biqarrs murdered the King's entourage and arrested Doso. They stabbed out the King's eyes

with hot metal pokers, sawed off his horns, and cut out his tongue. They paraded him around the city before dropping him into a vat of molten gold melted down from the very tribute they were being forced to pay the De’Nosi.

Overconfident, the leader of the Biqarrs, Pon, decided to expand his kingdom and demanded that the widowed queen of the De’Nosi, Ki’Ess, marry him.

Pon sent his best ambassadors to De’Otos with news of the late king Doso’s death. Doso’s severed horns had been dipped in the gold of their delinquent tribute and given to Ki’Ess as a macabre engagement gift in hopes that their union would combine their territories under one banner.

Surprisingly, Queen Ki’Ess agreed to marry the regicidal Pon.

She sent the ambassadors back to Pon requesting he send a delegation of only the most influential and important officials and aristocrats of the Biqarrs to escort Ki’Ess back to Pon for their wedding.

When the *influential and important* Biqarrs arrived in De’Otos, she invited them to relax from their long journey in her royal bathhouse, which had been ornately decorated specifically for their arrival. After each of the influential and important Biqarrs were inside the bathhouse, Ki’Ess ordered her soldiers to lock the doors and set the building ablaze.

She sent another message to the oblivious Biqarrs

requesting that Pon and his court prepare a large feast to honour her dead husband. Explaining how, before such a feast, she could not in good conscience officially agree to marry the ruler of the Biqarrs.

When she arrived for the feast, she was effortlessly able to compel the court to drink themselves to intoxication. Biqarrs' social conventions dictated that it was improper to refuse to toast along with an ur'ka. Ki'Ess toasted everything. From her upcoming nuptials to the state of her ostentatious accommodations to efforts of the many daloqi who scurried around the banquet hall filling and refilling the many goblets of wine of their masters.

Her own entourage abstained from drinking claiming an adherence to De'Nosi tradition which forbade the imbibing of wine when in the presence of their Queen. When the Biqarrs had drunk themselves into incapacitation, the sober De'Nosi viscously and enthusiastically murdered them all. They freed the daloqi within the banquet hall and went house to house, structure to structure, liberating slaves wherever they found them. Afterward, they burnt the entire city to cinders. The freed daloqi readily joined Ki'Ess as she raised an army to march on the Biqarrs capital. Her forces laid siege to the city for nearly an Os.

The Biqarrs, under the disastrous rule of Pon's eldest son, Valeq, were starving and desperate. Some accounts claimed the Biqarrs resorted to cannibalism

to survive during the long siege.

Outside the walls, Queen Ki'Ess (now called *the Witch of De'Nosi* by the Biqarrs) declared that she would end the siege immediately and forgive the delinquency of their tribute only if they offered her three Iona birds from each house within the city.

In Biqarrs culture, the Iona bird was a sacred protector of the home. The Iona created nests in specially constructed roosts atop all the houses and governmental buildings. This request of three Iona birds greatly confused the Biqarrs but they abided *the Witch of De'Nosi* who collected the birds in massive cages before bringing them back to her camp. By Qi'Ar, the Biqarrs saw that the Queen's army had completely deconstructed their camp and had disappeared from the sandy plain outside the city gates.

The Biqarrs rejoiced and celebrated deep into Qi'Ar.

Many dots of light appeared on the horizon. The lights grew in intensity as they neared until the entire sky was blanketed in fire. Ki'Ess had ordered that a piece of sulfur, bundled in cloth, be tied to each of the Iona birds' legs. They set fire to the cloth and released the terrified birds who instinctively returned to their specially constructed roosts atop every home and major structure within the city.

The Queen of the De'Nosi watched as the city burnt. She laughed and cheered as the angry flames illuminated the Qi'Ar earning her the moniker: *the*

Witch of Flame.

Afterward, the Queen claimed all of the Biqarrs territory for the De’Nosi. She was the first ur’ka to ever serve as ruler of the De’Nosi. Afterward, she declared the role of ruler could *only* be passed down from mother to daughter. Her matriarchal line lasted for seven generations until the end of the Warlord Period.

The Azai were far more progressive than their mainland counterparts and allowed ur’ka more agency and self-determination but Pod’ka were still given deference within Azai society. Kerosi’s young mind had been envious of the matriarchal rule of the De’Nosi and she often fantasized about being a queen herself. When she was by herself, Kerosi would sit on her balcony and write out the fictional adventures of a plucky ur’ka she’d named *Wu’An* whom Kerosi had based heavily on herself.

She squinted her eyes but she wasn’t processing anything visually. She was inside her mind wondering if the exploits of *Wu’An the Warrior Princess* still existed as ink and parchment under the bed of her apartment or if the Imperium had reduced the entire island to ash and cinders.

They came across dead Y’nari on the road when they finally reached the ruins of De’Otos. As they neared, Kerosi could see the decaying bodies were partially eaten.

“Are these Sansarcs?” Kerosi asked.

“What kind of creature could have done this?” Iblik wondered, ignoring Kerosi’s question as he carefully inspected the wounds of the nearest dead Y’nari.

Many of the dead were wearing red robes. When Iblik rolled one of the bodies over, Kerosi saw a symbol stitched in gold thread on the Y’nari’s chest.

“Car’toxis?” She furrowed her brow.

The whole ground began to shake and it knocked Kerosi to her knees. She had to throw her palms out, scraping them across the gritty cobblestone, to avoid tumbling into the mauled remains of the dead Y’nari strewn along the path.

“The curse of the Witch of Flame,” one of the sand demons gasped.

“I don’t believe in curses,” Iblik said. “Especially went volcanoes exist.”

“There haven’t been any volcanic eruptions in this part of the A’Yrr Mountains since the time of the Olix period,” Kerosi said.

“Then we’re overdue, wouldn’t you say?” Iblik smirked.

“That’s an ominous thought,” one of the sand demons looked pensively into the mountains above them.

They pressed deeper into the ruins and found more bodies. These too had large chunks of flesh torn from their bodies. Somewhere within the dark corridors of the ruins a sharp shriek jolted the party to attention.

The frantic rhythmic slapping of bare feet against wet stone raced closer. A dirty, frightened, emaciated slave burst from the shadows and rushed past them, ignoring their party entirely, as they hysterically fled the ruins.

Another riotous shaking overtook them dislodging grit and dust from the ceiling casting a dry mist upon their heads.

Tet sneezed.

When the shaking stopped, they resumed their investigation of De'Otos. They found a massive spiral staircase that led down into a maze of intersecting corridors whose design and construction contrasted starkly from the ruins above. Instead, looking like the decayed, forgotten twin of Doxiq.

They were able to find a large hall in relatively the same location as the transporter hub in Doxiq. A majority of the teleporters were operational and actively sparking and humming with a powerful energy.

Kerosi could see the lands beyond within each portal. Beside each portal was a symbol that Kerosi connected back to locations in the ancient world.

Pa'Qel in the Feros Woods.

At'An in the Swamp of Sug'Ogg.

The fabled floating city of Jora; among others.

The transporter to Doxiq had indeed been destroyed and its pieces were scattered about. Another of the transporters had wet, frantic tracks spilling out from the energy sphere labelled: A'ra.

“A’ra!” Kerosi breathed.

The rest of the party followed the trail of footprints, blood, and the partially eaten bodies of robed Y’nari that led deeper into the ruins. Kerosi stayed exactly where she was. She was intensely contemplating stepping through the energy barrier into A’ra, the capital city of the lost realm of Qi’Arsus. The lost *fifth realm* had been separated from all the other realms of Asmita when the Green Wave cataclysm reformed the mountains and valleys of Te’a.

Out of the corner of Kerosi’s eye she saw movement and heard an unnerving chittering before another violent quake shook De’Otos. Huge chunks of the ceiling broke free and came crashing down. Kerosi leapt out of the way, sliding painfully across the stone floor narrowly avoiding being crushed.

She rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself up to a seated position. She heard muffled voices calling her name and she dazedly rose to her feet.

She coughed and tried to rub the dust from her face.

“Iblik!” She called. “Ta’Satt? Is everyone okay?”

“We are here,” Iblik’s faint voice responded through the rubble separating the corridor from the massive hall that housed the many sparking and humming energy spheres. “Are you okay?”

She scanned her body and found no injuries. When she looked around the hall, she saw the sphere

connecting them to A'ra had been destroyed by a large chunk of the dislocated ceiling. It was no longer active.

"I'm alive," she coughed.

"Stay where you are and we'll find another way around to retrieve you," Iblik said.

She did sit there awhile waiting for the others to find an alternate route to her. Then, she heard a voice she remembered. A voice that shocked her to her feet. It was Yolarr, one of the senior guild instructors at the Azai Grand Library.

She strained her ears to decipher where his voice was coming from and realized the sound was emanating from beneath her feet. One of the large stone blocks from the crumbling ceiling had partially broken through to the chamber below her. She knelt down to the hole in the floor and listened for Yolarr's voice again.

Yolarr had left the island a few senix before the Imperium invaded to meet with senior members of *the Aq'Adezean Academy of Antiquities*. She almost called out to him but then noticed something strange in the way he spoke. The voice was his but the cadence was wrong.

She peered down into the hole and saw Yolarr was wearing the same robes emblazoned with the symbol of the god of chaos: Car'toxis. There were other robed Y'nari with him. They were gathering together scrolls and tomes and removing them from the room. At the centre of the room there was a large, dark well with

symbols painted around the circumference in blood. It was far too dark and she was too far away to decipher to the meaning of symbols but she recognized the shapes as belonging to the ancient A'ua'ki script.

Tentacles rose from within the well and Kerosi shrieked and fell backward. The force of which caused the roof to jostle and sink slightly before crumbling away completely. She came crashing down hard on the floor of the chamber below.

Yolarr and the other robed Y'nari stopped what they were doing and turned to face Kerosi. Something about their expressions was vacant and hauntingly unnerving.

"Master Yolarr?" Kerosi wheezed as the wind slowly returned to her chest. "What are you doing here?"

He just stared at her, silently.

Behind her, more tentacles rose from the dark well and reached out hungrily for her.

CHAPTER 49

IN AN ATTEMPT TO HEAL HER EXTENSIVE WOUNDS, Ra'Quro had employed the secrets of restoration *wu'jik* which *the Shadows in the Darkness* had pilfered from the traditions of the Wu'jikarr monks. Though she knew of nothing that could regenerate her fingers or her missing eye. She stared at the empty spaces where they had once been as the light from her campfire danced about. She was thankful that the deep lacerations on her arms and torso had closed. The scarring was diminishing each time she stopped to cast the healing ritual on herself.

Her journey east across Aq'Adez had been slowed by the frequent breaks required to scavenge for more reagents for her solo restoration ritual. The healing

wu'jik was not working as effectively since she was forced to practice it on herself. Usually, it was abjurers who would attend to the healing of a Shadow's injuries. That would no longer be an option for her. She wondered if there was another Shadow already on their way to *retire* her.

Much of her energy had returned. The range of motion in her once limp, nearly useless, arm had too been somewhat restored to what it had been before her run in with the Aqlut. She was worried that her arm may have healed incorrectly because there was a persistent ache within her elbow joint that would not go away.

While she walked, she tried to practice ways of using her remaining fingers that would improve her dexterity but her progress was discouragingly slow going. She'd found a rock of an unusual shape, which she tried to rotate in her hand. First one way and then back in the opposite direction. It kept slipping out of her grasp and falling to the jungle floor. She screamed out a curse and fell to her knees, sobbing.

Eventually, Ra'Quro picked up the rock again and rose to her feet. She let out a long sigh before resuming her dexterity exercises.

She walked for nearly a senix (frequently stopping for her exercises and healing rituals) before she was able to tie a knot in a long blade of grass she'd picked from the jungle floor. Even so, it took entirely too long

for her clumsy digits to form the grass into a passable knot.

She cursed again.

Her trek hit a snag when she was forced to sneak past an Aq'Adezean encampment barricading the slender trade route through the mountain pass connecting western and eastern Aq'Adez. She didn't have time nor the supplies to circumvent the Aq'Adezean barricade. The journey would've taken her more than a senix to traverse and take her a great ways south before having to press north again after crossing the sands. No. She was already too far behind Ka'Cyr and her expedition and the memories she'd stolen from the late Warlord Owtol were degrading and fading from her mind.

Aq'Adezean forces were meticulously checking the papers of everyone who passed through the barricade and she had no such documentation. She spent a few ossa on the western side of the barricade formulating a plan.

As she considered the options she had available to her, she stared up at the absolutely massive A'Yrr Mountain range that dwarfed the green mountains she'd once called home.

Before, Ra'Quuro would have simply waited until Qi'Ar and then scaled the cliffs at a point that was obscured from view. Now though, the pain in her joints had steadily been building. The loss of her fingers and her eye sacrificed any kind of dexterity for such an

endeavour despite the healing rituals and exercises.

Initially, she tried to flirt with one of the off-duty soldiers at the makeshift bar that had popped up on the western side of the barricade. Even in his inebriated state, the soldier saw her mutilated hand and her missing digits and sneered. She'd tried to hide her missing eye by parting her hair differently but the Pod'ka brought harsh attention to it. He made a slew of rude remarks about her being *irredeemably damaged* and *undesirable half-blood*. She retreated into the shadows but followed the rude Pod'ka after he'd stumbled away from the safety of the bar and found a way to discreetly kill him but drew it out as long as she could so he died in extreme pain.

On the third ossa, she noticed that a specific shift of Aq'Adezean soldiers (the second shift of the Qi'Ar) tended not to check every satchel of goods from each cart that passed through. They would instead open the satchels and containers that were most easily accessible to the back of each cart and completely ignore the ones deeper in before waving the cart along.

She snuck into one of the grain shipments and passed through the barricade without incident.

She'd been growing discouraged the closer she came to the location she'd seen in Warlord Owtol's memories. She was beginning to believe the lead Ka'Cyr had on her was becoming insurmountable.

Then she arrived at the ruins of De'Otos.

There were bodies littering the cobblestones leading into the former seat of power of *the Witch of Flame*. Some of the bodies were wearing armour she recognized as belonging to the soldiers of the deceased Warlord Owtol. Other bodies wore the leather armour of a Sen'Daris Er'Ebos recruit. She rushed to examine the corpses and checked for signs of the Vo'dis, Ka'Cyr, but she was not among the dead.

She screamed angrily into the sky and smashed her fists on the still, rigid flesh of the nearest dead soldier splayed out on the ground. She looked into the cold, cloudy eyes of the dead soldier and saw the terror frozen on their face. She squinted and wondered if she could still pull any memories from the dead Y'nari or if his mind had been dead for too long to be viable.

She attempted it anyway.

Her mutilated hand began to glow as she placed it over the dead Y'nari's forehead.

She felt hysteria.

She felt the supreme terror of being devoured and she shrieked. Falling back on her hands. She hadn't noticed before but there were indeed large chunks torn from the flesh of the fallen soldiers.

There were more bodies nearby that didn't resemble the others. They were wearing deep red coloured robes with an ancient symbol stitched into the chest in brightly contrasting golden thread.

She attempted the mind siphoning ritual on one of

the robed Y'nari and instantly felt something strange and terrifying. The residue of hundreds of minds were swimming around inside this dead Y'nari's skull.

<<*Someone betrayed us*>> one of the voices within the dead Y'nari's mind was compelled to reveal.

<<*They freed them. Set them loose. They came flooding out of the transporters from the Blighted Lands...*>>

There was a loud squeal and Ra'Quro shot to her feet. An Y'nari rounded the corner but moved in an odd and unnerving manner. As the stranger neared, she saw there were chitinous growths protruding from their skin. A pair of flexible tendrils sprouted from their back supplementing the odd Y'nari's normal limbs. It hissed and chattered at Ra'Quro as it jerkily lumbered toward her.

CHAPTER 50

KEROSI STARED UP INTO THE FACE OF her former master in stunned confusion while he returned her gaze with a vacancy and disinterest that she found shocking.

One of the tentacles slithering out from the well at the centre of the room caressed her foot and Kerosi shrieked. She whipped her foot away before the tentacle was able to curl around her ankle and yank her into the pit.

There were two other robed Y'nari that appeared on either side of her. They gripped her by the arms and lifted her to her feet.

Master Yolarr stepped toward the massive altar pressed against the far wall of the chamber. When

he returned, he was holding an ornately decorated ceremonial box. Master Yolarr moved to a carved stone pulpit that was positioned in front of the well a ways outside the reach of the wriggling tentacles that sightlessly swayed and stretched out for Kerosi.

Yolarr spoke words from the Oglisa and the two Y'nari forcefully holding her upright voiced their responses according to the ritual. In the ceremonial box, a cracked sphere of er'gosi began to glow and pulse.

The erosikai, Kerosi's eyes widened.

"Master Yolarr," Kerosi's voice faltered and cracked. "What are you doing? What is all this?"

His demeanor had changed from the one she remembered. It was as if someone else entirely was wearing his skin.

Whereas her father had pushed her to attain an almost impossible standard in order for her to receive even the most subtle recognition, Master Yolarr had been the one to openly acknowledge and celebrate her growth within the Azai Grand Library.

Her father had expressed uncertainty over whether Kerosi was adept enough to undertake the copying of *the Crimson Insurrection of Grix*. Master Yolarr, in contrast, personally campaigned for her to be assigned the technically arduous text.

His belief in her encouraged Kerosi to prove to her father that she was not only capable of reproducing the notoriously intricate document but that she would excel

at the task.

That was where she began her compulsion to read any text she was about to copy (often multiple times) before she set to work. She could remember the main beats of the story of Grix effortlessly:

In the time of *the Shipmaster*, there were multiple uprisings that were violently put down by the rulers of the city-state of Nesoq and the surrounding areas. The failed insurrectionists believed in supernatural potions and mystical amulets that would protect against their rulers' weapons. They were proven ineffective in practice as their insurrection was quickly quelled by Nesoq's superior weaponry.

Grix was the third son of one of the leaders of a nebulous criminal organization that oversaw the operations of brothels and gambling establishments. They also offered protection against bandits who were becoming emboldened by the political instability of the time. They unofficially shared power with the local Nesoq government and were tasked with clandestinely controlling the region in ways that could officially be disavowed. This rampant corruption led to a revolt by a virtuous official who brought down the pillars of the criminal organization and removed the offending officials from government. There were public court trials that culminated in mass executions. Grix's father and two older brothers were among those put to death for their role in what was called *the Brakol Volqik* or

Those Who Control from the Shadows.

Grix and his younger sister were left on their own after their mother killed herself when she'd found the stigma of their family legacy and the chaos of raising two young children alone became too much. Technically, Grix had still been too young to work but was brought on as an apprentice by a local fisherman who saw the miserable pair begging on the dirty Nesoq streets. As Grix became an adult, he leaned away from fishing and became a competent shipbuilder.

The many Os of virtuous, thoughtful, and benevolent rulers slowly devolved once again into corruption. There were gangs that sprung up as the power of the government waned. These gangs would frequently loot residences and blackmail businesses for protection money. Kidnapping was also a major source of income for these gangs who would sell those they captured to slavers in Aq'Adez and southern Tul.

Loza, the younger sister of Grix, was snatched up after one of the gangs raided the garment factory where she'd been working and was sold into slavery. Grix learned of her abduction too late and was unable to find her before she changed hands with her new owners. Disappearing into the lucrative vastness of the slave trade.

Os continued to pass and Grix became a master shipbuilder. Sought after for his expert craftsmanship. Jealous local competition banded together to oust Grix

and his shipbuilding business from the port. With the help of corrupt officials, bogus charges were brought against Grix that claimed he was attempting to create a second *Brakol Volqik*. There was little evidence to support such claims aside from his familial connection. The trial was privately carried out and concluded with the confiscation of all of Grix's assets and materials. He was imprisoned indefinitely in a tiny cell that overlooked the marina. He could only watch as the ships (some of which he had crafted with his own hands) sailed in and out of port.

By the end of ten Os, the Nesoq government had become irredeemably corrupt. The funding of government programs that had traditionally facilitated the growth of the region was instead siphoned into the pockets of business leaders and officials. Food costs jumped and the prices of housing spiked sharply causing mass evictions. At the same time, the wages of common Y'nari were slashed to a point where they could no longer purchase the products and services that allowed the economy to function and the region revolted. The peasantry banded together with new *righteous gangs* to overthrow the government. In the chaos, all of the prisons were emptied and Grix enjoyed freedom once again.

While he'd been in prison, Grix had shared his cell with a political prisoner named Tos who'd been apprehended for preaching the teachings of the Oglisa.

The city-state of Nesoq had outlawed mysticism of any kind as it undermined their role as the supreme authority in the region. Tos converted Grix to the teachings of the prophet, *Ogg Lis*, and their message of pacifism, self-sufficiency, and a reverence and respect for the natural world.

Once they had been liberated from prison, the two moved into the highlands overlooking the port city of Nesoq where they slowly built up a spiritual practice. They steadily began to accrue followers from all across Aq'Adez. Colloquially, they were referred to as *U'vid Evarr*.

The Quiet Ones.

Rumours of the pair's agrarian commune and their gentle, mindful interpretation of the Oglisa drew many who were disenfranchised with the harsh way the surrounding lands were being governed.

The core of their philosophy espoused that Y'nari only require four things: *to create, to consume, to cavort, and to commune*. To bringing something to life, to appreciate the creations of others, to dance and leap about in an enthusiastic and lively manner, and finally, to support a robust community with which to socialize and feel connected.

The region was running almost completely on slave labour to meet the demands of their economy but with none left with the purchasing power to consume the goods the slaves were creating, they came to rely

heavily on foreign trade.

Grix was oblivious to the actions of Tos and a secret few others who'd taken up banditry along the trade routes in and out of Nesoq. They used their plunder to purchase old ships (some of which were constructed by Grix the Shipmaster himself) in order to interfere with shipping routes. These pirates came to be known as *the Crimson Raiders*, named after the unique colour they dyed their mainsails. The dye was derived from a mixture of the red sands of the Crimson Coast, pink Wina flowers, and the deep purple of Sharran wheat. Nearly identical to the recipe for the *Azai red* which Kerosi had used to ink the reproduction itself all those Os ago.

Humiliated and angered by the losses inflicted upon them by *the Crimson Raiders*, the government of Nesoq called upon the neighbouring Tuleans and the fledgling Aq'Adezean Republic to help coordinate a joint offensive against the pirates and bandits.

A smaller ship belonging to *the Crimson Raiders* was captured and the crew intensely interrogated. The pirates let slip that they were working under the secret direction of the seemingly pacifist monk Tos. A formidable force was amassed against *the Quiet Ones*. They barricaded the entrances and exits to the commune.

Due to their benevolent image and the positive way in which the peasants viewed *the U'vid Evarr*, Nesoq

forces wished to avoid any kind of violent engagement lest their aggression coax more of the common Y'nari to defect. *The Quiet Ones'* self-sufficiency made the Nesoq blockade largely useless and succeeded in being annoying more than anything else.

One Qi'Ar, a group of slaves were paraded in front of *the Quiet Ones* along with the imprisoned pirates from the captured *Crimson Raiders'* ship. Nesoq forces demanded that the leaders, Tos and Grix, be handed over to them to face crimes of banditry, piracy, murder, and treason. If they weren't handed over in a timely manner, all of the slaves and captured pirates would be executed in front of them.

At first, Grix was incredulous to the charges having any merit and considered that the corrupt Nesoq were cynically trying to fabricate any cause to chase them from their lands.

Grix attempted diplomacy in good faith, still oblivious to the true nature of Tos and *the Crimson Raiders*. The negotiations went poorly as Nesoq believed Grix to be lying about his involvement. Nesoq forces lined up the slaves and the prisoners in front of the barricade. In the dim torchlight, *the Quiet Ones* began to wail. The Nesoq forces had scoured the slavemarkets for kin belonging to the pacifist monks. Grix saw his sister Loza's face among the slaves lined up along the barricade. Only now, her face was aged and weary from over twenty Os of slavery.

“In your fear, speak only peace,” Grix had said to them. “Truth shall prevail. We have not transgressed in that which they claim and E’om will return our loved ones to us.”

His conviction was misplaced.

Unmoved by the pleading *U’vid Evarr* who cried out in vain for mercy for their loved ones, the Nesoq slaughtered the slaves and the pirates as *the Quiet Ones* watched. The Nesoq forces beheaded their corpses and stabbed them onto pikes lining the barricade.

Grix collapsed in stunned silence.

Tos and the others rushed the barricades armed with a stockpile of weapons that Grix was unaware existed within *the Quiet Ones’* monastery. In the aftermath, the Nesoq forces had been broken and fled back to the port city.

“Non-violence only works if your oppressor has a conscience and empathy,” Tos had argued after the battle.

Grix blamed Tos and the others for the death of his sister Loza. He could not forgive the deception of the very Y’nari who had converted him to the pacifist teachings of Ogg Lis.

“Y’nari are more important than land,” Grix had replied. “You would kill and die for sand?”

Tos and *the Crimson Raiders* remained in Aq’Adez defending territory they believed was theirs. Their descendants became the Toshida.

Grix, however, led his flock of agrarian pacifists along the Crimson Coast. They were frequently accosted by the local authorities. Instead of engaging, they would migrate further and further along the coast until they were forced into a harrowing last stand. Some followers urged violence but Grix used his knowledge of shipbuilding to create *the Crimson Fleet* in secret while their enemies planned their annihilation.

Enemy forces were led to believe that *the Quiet Ones* had fortified themselves in a network of caves in the cliffs above the shore of the Crimson Coast. When enemy forces descended upon the caves, they found that its inhabitants were actually dummies made of cloth and leather; stuffed with sand and hay. All the while, *the Crimson Fleet* had been laying in wait inside a secluded lagoon a short ways down the coast. Grix and the others were able to flee into open water after burning the enemy ships so they could not immediately follow. The version of the text of *the Crimson Insurrection of Grix* that Kerosi had copied concluded its narrative with the founding of the Azai kingdom.

She remembered how proud Master Yolarr had been when he'd seen her reproduction and intently reviewed her work. She recalled the look of pride in his eyes but, now, Master Yolarr's eyes were vacant and glassy. His voice was barking out the rote repeating of the words in the Oglisa before him. He held out the cracked erosikai so that it was just above her head.

As Master Yolarr continued speaking the ancient words of the ritual, she could feel a dark energy welling up inside her. A heat was growing from within her chest and forehead.

“Master Yolarr!” She sobbed as the pain grew and the heat within her spiked. “Please! Why are you doing this?”

Master Yolarr shrieked in agony as his eyes burst into flames. He dropped the glowing erosikai and fell to his knees. He buried his flaming head in his hands. The robed Y’nari on either side of Kerosi released their tight grip on her arms. She collapsed to the stone tiles next to the violet glow of the pulsing erosikai. They too grabbed their burning faces as they wailed and shrieked. Their whole forms burst into flame and each began racing around the chamber. One of the robed Y’nari ventured too close to the dark well and was ensnared by a black tentacle that pulled him squealing into the well.

An ur’ka emerged from the darkness. She stepped toward Kerosi. The still, silent, bodies of Master Yolarr and the other robed Y’nari crackled as they burned.

The ur’ka knelt down and picked up the cracked erosikai next to Kerosi. The ur’ka held the ceremonial box she’d torn from the burnt out husk of the cultist, Yolarr. The strange ur’ka locked eyes with Kerosi and instantly she felt a visceral and familiar connection to her.

And to the erosikai.

CHAPTER 51

SA'TOMI AND TET HAD BOTH SURVIVED the cave in with little more than bruises and a powdering of dust. When they rose to their feet, Sa'tomi saw there was no way they could possibly dig themselves out from beneath the massive stone blocks that barred their way. They would have to hope there was another way around the cave-in to rejoin the others in the transportation hub.

Tet was relieved to hear Kerosi's muffled voice reply to Iblik on the other side of the cave-in. They had to blindly feel along the cold walls of the dark corridor before reaching an intersection where they saw the flickering torchlight bleeding out from a chamber a ways ahead.

Sa'tomi took charge trying to return them to the transporter hub. Tet followed behind silently.

It took them a while as they had to retrace their steps a few times but, eventually, they were able to make it back around to the transportation hub.

Most of the energy spheres were non-functional. The ones that were sparked angrily. Images on the skin of the energy spheres were jittery and distorted. Tet had been trained by the A'ji back in Doxiq on how to reconnect the transporter to the network again once they arrived at the ruins. Only now, Tet had no idea *which* energy sphere was the correct one that would return them to Doxiq. There were symbols beside each of the energy spheres but Tet could not decipher any of them.

Frantic, slapping footsteps reverberated about the chamber as Ra'Quro appeared racing down the connecting corridor. A number of horrific creatures aggressively charged close behind her in pursuit.

Ra'Quro careened into Sa'tomi sending the trio crashing through the skin of the nearest energy sphere. The field closed behind them. The glow from the energy sphere disappeared trapping Sa'tomi, Tet, and Ra'Quro on the other side where it was cold, wet, and dark. Tet heard only the pained groaning of the others but then, from deep within the blackness of wherever the transporter had deposited them, a chorus of chittering and hissing called out to them from all sides.

CHAPTER 52

AS KEROSI STARED INTO THE STRANGE ur'ka's eyes, she saw a shared recognition; a familiarity. The closer she examined the stranger's eyes, the more questions burst into her mind.

The stranger's forearm was pulsing with a glow from underneath her skin. The pulsing light throbbed in time with that of the erosikai. The stranger looked weak.

Exhausted.

The stranger tried to maintain her tenuous balance but uneasily swayed back and forth on her feet as though she were intoxicated. The ur'ka clumsily turned the erosikai over in her hands intently before returning it to the ceremonial box alongside the Oglisa.

“Kerosi!” A voice called down to her from the hole in the ceiling.

It was Iblik. He scaled down the porous walls landing on the stone in front of her.

“Iblik there were-”

“Orvos?” The strange ur’ka locked eyes with Iblik and looked confused. “What ar-”

Before she could say anything else, Iblik jerked the ceremonial box from Vo’dis Ka’Cyr.

The erosikai called to Kerosi as the world slowed down to near stillness.

Kerosi found she was still somehow able to move at her normal speed. She reached over to open the ceremonial box and took the erosikai into her hands. She felt the supreme power the artifact cast off. She hesitated a moment in reverence before she dropped the erosikai into the leather tube along with the ancient documents with the secret messages still needing to be deciphered.

Time resumed.

In the next instant, Iblik kicked the weakened Vo’dis Ka’Cyr hard in the chest. She flew backward into the pit where the dark, hungry tentacles snatched her from the air. Yanking her into the blackness of the well.

“Iblik?” Kerosi cautiously whispered. “Why did she call you Orvos?”

Iblik paused for the briefest of moments before coldly kicking Kerosi into the pit as well.

CHAPTER 53

IT HAD BEEN A FEW OSSA AND TA'SATT and the others still had not returned. The chatter around Doxiq was that their mission had ended in failure. Evoq planned to wait for official news before believing the gossip.

While he anxiously waited, Evoq took solace in the vast number of religious texts he had access to. He'd found a holy document that, until then, he'd only seen references to. No originals were believed to exist after the Warlord, Koraj, destroyed *the Fount of Knowledge*: an epic library constructed high within newly formed mountains created when the Green Wave had severed the ancient lands of Kent in two. The Blighted Lands to the north and Tul to the south. All the knowledge of *the*

Light-bringers was believed to reside within its walls.

It had been commonplace for the words *bei en'okos karr* to be written in the margins of official documents of the time.

For the knowledge of all.

When travellers passed through the mountains separating Tul from the Blighted Lands, writing *bei en'okos karr* signified that the original owner of a particular document had willingly agreed to relinquish ownership to *the Fount of Knowledge*.

Of course, one was not legally required to part with personal documents but the social consensus was that everyone was *expected* to surrender any and all documents of a historical, political, or spiritual nature so they could be added to the existing collection.

The Warlord, Koraj, sought to destroy the last thread connecting the Warlord Period back to what intellectuals of the time referred to as *the Classical Period*.

By the end of the senix, Evoq's anxiety over his missing companions was reaching its peak. Then, A'ji leaders announced that they would speak about the state of the insurgency and the fate of the missing expedition in the main hall.

When Iblik took the stage, he sombrely recounted the fateful events of their doomed mission.

"Our intelligence was inaccurate and, when we arrived at the site, we found Aq'Adezean Republic forces,

not Sansarc cultists, had disconnected the transporter from our network,” Iblik explained to the crowd of eager and captivated listeners. “We were ambushed and many of us were killed before we even knew something was wrong.”

Ta’Satt! Evoq welled up and choked back his tears.

“Hopelessly outnumbered, fearless heroes within our expedition courageously and selflessly charged the Aq’Adezeans allowing a grateful few in our party to survive.”

Iblik listed off names of the fallen A’ji and heard *Ta’Satt’s* among them.

“It is with supreme sadness that I must announce Kerosi, the brave and-” Iblik stopped and brought a hand to his face. He looked to be wiping away tears. “I’m sorry I . . . this news hits me particularly hard as Kerosi, while only being with us a short time, has had a very intense influence on myself as I’m sure she has on each and every one of you. Kerosi is the reason the freed daloqi, the Azai refugees, and the A’ji have each united to form this powerful block of freedom fighters who wish to throw off the yoke of our Aq’Adezean oppressors. To challenge and resist the blood-thirsty Imperium invaders flooding into lands that rightfully belong to all of *us*.”

He started into an anecdote about discussing Grix and the Crimson Insurrection with Kerosi in the book-stacks of Doxiq.

“Before Kerosi, I had only a passing understanding of Grix and the history of the founding of the great kingdom of the Azai. Kerosi helped me understand that those stories of bravery and resistance were not something static that we must view impotently from our time in the present. No. Kerosi taught me there is *still* such a thing as bravery. There is *still* such a thing as righteous resistance. Yes, our connection to the ruins may have been severed by our enemies. Because of her selfless sacrifice, Kerosi has ensured that the Aq’Adezeans could not follow us back here to Doxiq. Even in death, Kerosi cares for and protects us from harm.”

The crowd was silently waiting for Iblik to continue.

“I look out at you all . . . and I see that we are no longer *just* the A’ji resistance,” Iblik began. “We are something more. We are something new. Something stronger. We are united. Kerosi’s brave actions on the Azai island during the Imperium invasion, her righteous act of defiance at Korsik, and her ultimate sacrifice at De’Otos have bound us all together. We are the A’ji no longer. We are *the Children of the Crimson Insurrection*. We are all siblings in *Kerosi’s Army*. Iblik shot a defiant fist into the air and shouted: “Kerosi! We vow to honour your ultimate sacrifice. *The Children of the Crimson Insurrection* will not rest until the whole of Asmita is free from tyranny.”

The crowd began chanting Kerosi’s name.

CHAPTER 54

BA'TAR OG'ADI'S NEW METAL MASK was markedly more menacing than the leather one. No one had challenged him on why he'd adopted to wear the dark mask.

Joroq was privately debriefing him about the intricacies of the Imperium's campaign into Aq'Adez before the next session of the Imperial war council later that ossa. Og'Adi interrupted to ask about the progress on the assassin and the fate of Vo'dis Ka'Cyr.

Joroq's contacts within *the Shadows in the Darkness* believed they had failed as they had not heard from the operative they'd sent after Ka'Cyr. Whispers from within the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos, however, revealed that Vo'dis Ka'Cyr was herself missing.

At the beginning of the war council meeting, Joroq announced that a senior intelligence operative had just arrived on the island with news about the region.

The spy revealed how the A'ji had uncovered an ancient transportation system which had the potential to discreetly and rapidly relocate their forces within Aq'Adez and possibly other realms as well.

They'd learned of a master transportation hub within the Labyrinth of Ur'Bos that was believed to connect every other transporter on Te'a.

Recently, multiple religious cults had been gaining influence and the spy began to explain their differences but Ba'Tar Og'Adi interrupted him dismissively.

"All cults and cultists are the same," Ba'Tar Og'Adi said.

"I think there's a profound truth at the centre of that," Orvos said.

Orvos presented Ba'Tar Og'Adi with the stolen ceremonial box he'd recovered from the cult in De'Otos. Unaware that Kerosi had pocketed the erosikai.

Joroq transferred the box from Orvos to Ba'Tar Og'Adi who felt the supreme power radiating from the box but, when he opened it, only the Oglisa was inside.

Enraged, Og'Adi barked at the spy about being incompetent and wasting the Imperium's time. Iblik was confusedly making excuses and seemed not to know about the missing erosikai. He had thought the ancient Oglisa inside the box was the erosikai artifact

they were looking for.

Ba'Tar Og'Adi angrily ordered for guards to arrest the spy.

Orvos tried to pivot the blame away from himself as the Imperial guards neared: "Ka'Cyr must have taken it from the box before I got there!"

"*Vo'dis* Ka'Cyr?"

"Ka'Cyr was a *Vo'dis*?" Orvos stammered confusedly. "I'd worked briefly with her at the start of the War when she was merely a *Mor'dari* of the Sen'Daris Er'Ebos."

"Where is the *Vo'dis* now?"

"Dead," Orvos answered quickly. "I killed her."

"*You* killed *Vo'dis* Ka'Cyr?" He smiled, amusedly leaning in to the spy.

"She appeared in the ruins of De'Otos where a cult to the god of chaos had severed its connection to our transportation network," Orvos said. "Somehow, Ka'Cyr had cleared out the cult from the ruins but it left her too weak to prevent me from killing her when she recognized me. *I* killed *Vo'dis* Ka'Cyr!"

"How did she die?" Ba'Tar Og'Adi grinned. "Speak slowly. I wish to savour every detail of her death."

EPILOGUE

SHE COULD FEEL THE OILS AND BILE within the throat of the tentacled monstrosity eating away at her exposed skin. It started as a slight tingling sensation and grew to irritation but now felt like her skin was on fire. Kerosi had shut her eyes tightly to keep the corrosive liquid from blinding her but she was fast collapsing into hopelessness. She could barely breathe. Whenever she opened her mouth, the acrid substance coating the monstrosity's throat assaulted her taste-buds. She tried to pull air through her nose instead but the vile scent caused her to cough and retch. She involuntarily opened her eyes for the briefest of moments but it was enough for the substance to rush in. Kerosi screamed in pain and desperate frustration.

A hand gripped around her wrist. It was gentle and purposeful. She could feel the inertia as she was pulled back up the throat of the monstrosity.

Her eyes were painfully irritated and cloudy as she was yanked from the maw of the tentacled monstrosity. She squinted at her rescuer but they were merely an amorphous blob within her injured, distorted vision. She could see, however, that her rescuer was glowing slightly with a charged energy that felt familiar.

The limp tentacles around her remained unmoving. They were either inert or deceased. Kerosi prayed for the latter as she wiped as much of the bile away from her face with a wet sleeve. Her whole body was covered in the substance and she only spread the bile around instead of wiping it away.

She was about to thank her strange rescuer but they turned and leapt back into the tentacled monstrosity's throat. Disappearing for a long while. Kerosi worried they might not return but then the stranger emerged with Vo'dis Ka'Cyr in tow.

Kerosi's vision had cleared slightly in the time the stranger had remained within the monstrosity. She now recognized her rescuer's inconspicuous clothing. They were dressed the same as the mysterious assassin who'd killed Grokix Aros on the Azai Island when he'd tried to interrogate Tela about the erosikai.

Ka'Cyr's senses were slowly returning as she unsteadily rose to her feet. She turned to face their

strange rescuer and instinctively began swinging at her with weak and uncoordinated fists. The stranger gently subdued Ka'Cyr with glowing hands and laid her to rest carefully against the aged stone tiles.

The stranger removed their leather mask to stare lovingly down at Ka'Cyr whose sore, irritated skin was blistered, pink, and inflamed from the corrosive bile.

Ka'Cyr was breathing slowly but steadily. She looked peacefully at rest.

"Surai?" Kerosi exclaimed in shocked surprise when her vision finally cleared.

The ur'ka turned back to Kerosi and smiled kindly. She shook her head tenderly and slowly stepped towards Kerosi where she knelt down beside her.

"No, my child," she gently caressed Kerosi's cheek. "I am Kyowa."

CHILDREN

OF THE

CRIMSON

INSURRECTION

APPENDIX

HARNESSING CHAOS PRIMER

THE WORLD OF **HARNESSING CHAOS** is called **Te'a** (tay-AH). It is broken up into three regions. The first region is called **Asmita** (OSS-me-tuh). It is a band of permanent dusk that wraps around the world and is the only of the three regions that is consistantly habitable. Asmita is where the majority of life exists on Te'a. On one side of Asmita is **Ovin** (AW-veen) a scorched expanse of perpetual light. Ovin's forbidden wastes hide a technological oasis obscured by time and memory. The other side is a region called **Vol** (VAHL). Vol is an icy, desolate landscape of eternal night.

The primary inhabitants of Te'a are the **Y'nari** (ee-NARR-ee). In the Age of Chaos, there are 7 races of Y'nari:

Sun'Ynarr (soo-NEE-narr)

Mok'Ynarr (mo-KEE-narr)

Qiat'Ynarr (kee-ah-TEE-narr)

Ysat'Ynarr (ee-suh-TEE-narr)

Vol'Ynarr (vahl-EE-narr)

Osk'Ynarr (oss-KEE-narr)

Tul'Ynarr (tewl-EE-narr)

There are three main celestial objects in the sky above Te'a. The first is **Ka** (KAW) - immovable, incapable of change. Ka is responsible for the intense, focused heat in Ovin and the habitable dusk of Asmita. Ka's complete absence in Vol makes the region bitterly cold and relentlessly dark. The second of the three celestial objects is **Arkus** (ARR-koo). Arkus seems to flit about the sky with no discernable pattern. It is seen as a morally ambiguous trickster. Finally, **Mōt** (MOTE) is the largest of the three and follows a predictable, dependable path in the sky. Mōt allows for the passage of days and the changing of the seasons in Te'a.

Time in Te'a is broken down into a system called **the Ar'kon Calendar** (arr-CONE). One **ossa** (OSS-uh) is the time between the rising of Mōt in the sky, it's disappearance beyond the horizon, and it's reappearance. A week in Te'a is called a **senix** (SENN-icks). A month is called a **urix** (YEW-ricks) and a year is an **Os** (OSS).

1 rotation = 1 ossa

7 ossa = 1 senix

6 senix = 1 urix

6 urix = 1 Os

The names of the 7 **ossa** (days of the week) are:

Sin'a (sih-NA)

Lis (LISS)

Opox (OH-pocks)

Ar'i (ah-REE)

Rix (RICKS)

Corsa (CORE-suh)

Ev'Arok (eh-VAH-roke)

The names of the 6 **urix** (months of the year) are:

O'sa (OH-suh) *Dawning*

Sota (SO-tah) *Glowing*

Ki (KEE) *Pyre*

Ardos (AR-doe-ss) *Dimming*

Pen'ar (peh-NARR) *Ember*

Qi'Ar (kee-YARR) *Slumber*

The size of Mōt in the sky dictates the changing of the seasons. Mōt is largest in *Sota* and *Ki* and the smallest in *Pen'ar* and *Qi'Ar*. The names of the **urix** (months) are also the 6 divisions of each **ossa** (day).

There are four realms in Asmita. **Tul** (TEWL) takes up the majority of the central plains between mountain ranges. **Aq'Adez** (ock-AH-dez) is on the eastern edge of Asmita and runs from Ovin up to the base of *the Labyrinth* where the lands become the realm of **Ur'Bos** (er-BO-ss). What had once been the ancient lands of **Kent** before *the Green Wave* cataclysm are now called **The Blighted Lands**, which span the border Asmita shares with Vol.

Languages in Te'a have risen and fallen out of favour over the various ages. The most ancient of which is **Y'vand'dbar** (EE-van-DUD-uh-BAR) or **Allspeak**. During *the Age of Empires*, each of the 7 Y'nari tribes developed their own dialect of Allspeak. Now, in *the Age of Chaos*, the most common language spoken in Asmita is Tulean.

When there is an apostrophe in a word, the emphasis is placed on the syllable *after* the apostrophe. So **Aq'Adez** would be (ock-AH-dez) and *not* (OCK-ah-dez). The emphasis is on the first syllable when the word does not contain an apostrophe.

So **Corsa** is (CORE-suh) and *not* (core-SUH). The exception is when there's only one letter before the apostrophe. So in the case of **R'nox** and **O'sa** it would be (R-nocks) and (OH-suh) *not* (r-NOCKS) or (oh-SUH).

Under Tulean rule, gender is rigidly categorized as either **Pod'ka** (poad-KA) or **ur'ka** (er-KA). Deviation from these two categories in public is a taboo that will attract the eyes of *the Tulean Inquisition*, the **Sen'Daris Er'Ebos** (sen-DARR-iss er-EBB-oss), who are tasked with keeping Tul pure. Those who do deviate from the binary call themselves **uk'Sanpo** (ook-SAN-poe) meaning: *my own soul*. In Tul, uk'Sanpo are derogatorily referred to as **K'uk'pa'uk** (KAH-ook-pah-ook) meaning: *outside and beneath*.

THE HISTORY OF ASMITA

THE TULEANS CREATED A CALENDAR that was adopted, either willingly or forcefully, by the rest of Te'a. The start of the calendar began with *the Green Wave* in oSL. After a full cycle of the seasons, the next S'ina Lis began. S'ina Lis was Allspeak for 'again at the beginning'. For the Azai, ***the early kingdom*** existed from the birth of the calendar to 1426SL after the resolution of *the War of the Four Realms*.

The middle kingdom began with *the Declaration of Imperial Supremacy*, an edict that proclaimed the suzerainty of the other three realms under Tul. The edict legitimized the Ar'Kos Empire that stretched across all of Asmita. When the Empire fell in 1648SL, there was a time of instability the Azai called ***the First Intermediate Period***. On the mainland, it was called ***the Warlord Period*** which lasted from the fall of the Ar'Kos Empire to 1763SL.

The new kingdom began after the decisive defeat of

the Warlord Confederacy in 1763SL when *the Coalition of the Four Realms* banded together to bring order to the chaos of the age. Tentative borders akin to the boundaries of the early kingdom were established and an era of peace returned to Asmita. It was short lived as Tul believed they had been robbed of the territory they'd acquired in the Middle Kingdom era.

In 1803SL, the Tuleans began various campaigns into the other three realms in an attempt to restore the full territory they'd once had in their legends after *the Great Sundering* when Argonos the Conqueror had overthrown the Ark'fey and first created Tul long before the introduction of the calendar. Tul's enthusiastic military leaders had spread their forces too thin. As a result, they could not quell the revolt that brought about the end of the nation's ambitions of a Second Empire. Then came ***the Second Intermediate Period***. Mainlanders called this period ***the Great Diaspora***.

The revolt that had toppled the Tuleans attempt at a Second Empire was achieved through the combined efforts of Y'nari from all four Realms. The Tuleans themselves helped bring down their rulers when it was clear that the Empire only served the upper echelon of Tulean society. Everyone else was being pushed further and further into poverty and forced servitude. The Second Empire bled out from the inside when the majority of its workforce deserted their positions and fled Tulean cities. This Great Diaspora left Tul struggling to execute even the most benign of tasks as those in charge of the structural integrity of the government had left along with the soldiers, workers, and farmers. The ineffectual aristocracy was left in regal solitude to rule empty cities. Many were said to have died of starvation as they did not know how to prepare their own meals let alone hunt or farm.

The Dynastic Era began with *the Return* in 2024SL. A

Tulean Y'nari marched on the ruins of Ar'mot, the ancient seat of power of the Ar'kos Empire of the early kingdom, with an army made up of soldiers and civilians of all the Four Realms. His name was Em'Itorok and his occupation of Ar'mot brought about *the Tulean Dynasty of Em*. His line ruled a newly formed Constitutional Monarchy which adhered to the new kingdom era boundaries of Tul. Kings of the Dynasty of Em were considered largely benevolent as rulers, if at times aloof and insular. The majority of their focus was concentrated on the capitol, Ar'mot, and the large urban centres of Tul.

By 2516SL, rhetoric about returning Tul to its Imperial roots was commonplace and even led to a ceremonial shifting of the title of the dynastic ruler from King to Emperor. It was in this period that Tul began referring to themselves as ***the Imperium***. However, government policy didn't change significantly along with its name. The Dynasty of Em continued until ***the Third Internecine War*** in 2624SL when Tulean General, Thrakis, overthrew Emperor Em'tornus and swiftly afterward began ***the Second War of Tulean Expansion***.

CHILDREN
OF THE
CRIMSON
INSURRECTION

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**

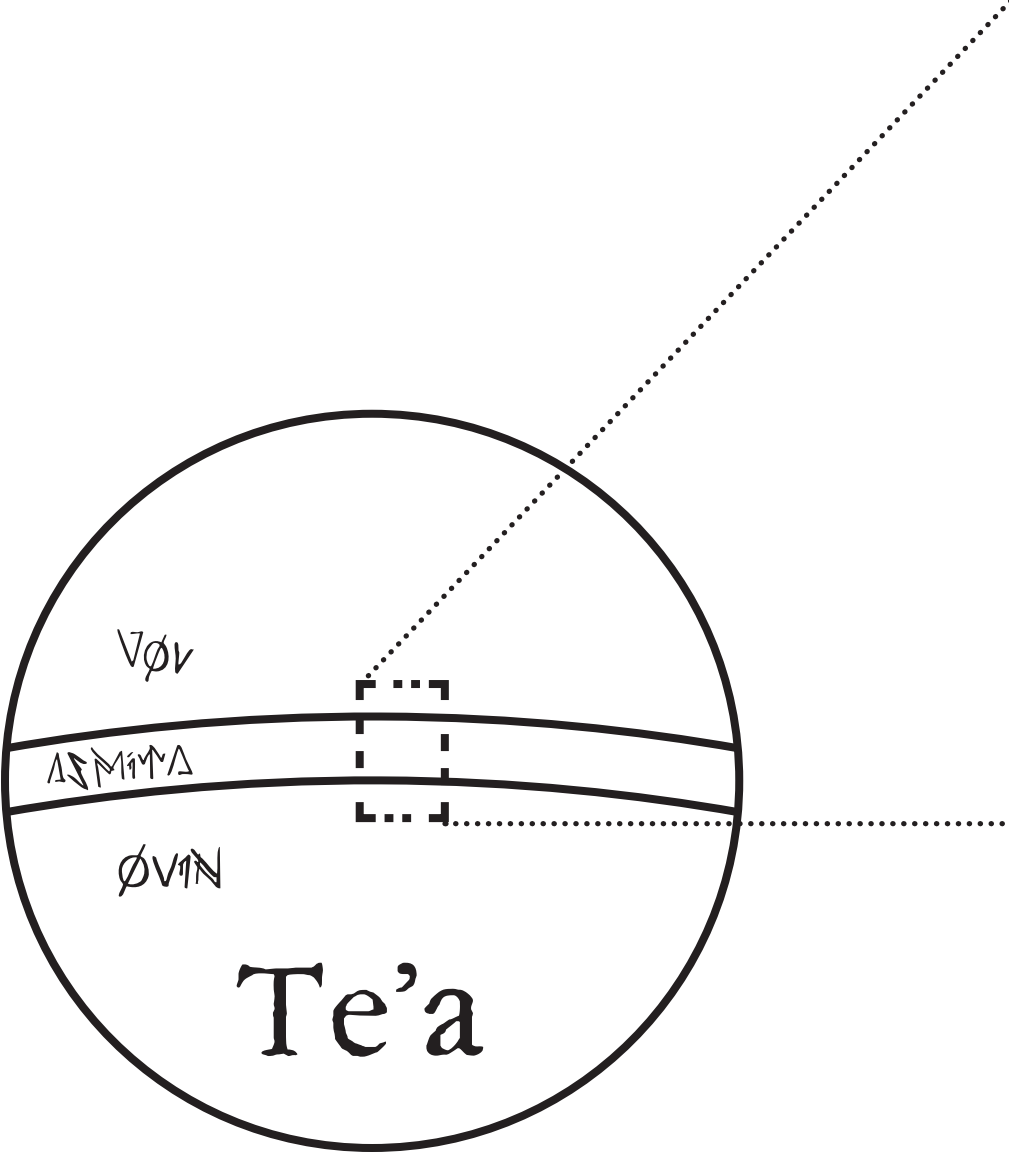
CENTRAL CHARACTERS

KEROSI (KERR-OH-SEE)	A young scribe at the Azai Grand Library who is making a name for herself in the literary world.
KA'CYR (KUH-SEER)	Newly promoted to Vo'dis, Ka'Cyr is sent to the Azai Kingdom to investigate the string of Grokix assassinations and the location of a mysterious artifact called the erosikai.
SA'TOMI (SUH-TOE-MEE)	A Tulean deserter struggling with <i>Imperium Chew</i> withdrawal.
RA'QURO (RUH-KYEW-ROWE)	A <i>Shadow</i> from the guild of assassins: <i>the Shadows in the Darkness</i> .
IBLIK (EYE-BLICK)	A high-ranking operative within the A'ji resistance.
OG'ADI (OGG-AH-DEE)	An Imperium Ba'Tar (Tulean military General) in charge of the invasion and occupation of the Azai Kingdom.
TET (TETT)	An influential hunter from the Et'Uvitan tribes of the Ix'Arki.
BOKIS (BOCK-ISS)	A City Guard Captain of the Azai Kingdom in Qisaq.
TELA (TELL-UH)	Close friend of Kerosi and fellow scribe at the Azai Grand Library.

ANCILLARY CHARACTERS

EVOQ (EE-VOCK)	The spiritual leader for the Aq'Adezean refugees.
DESTIM (DESS-TIM)	The Grokix mentoring Ka'Cyr on her first deployment as a Vo'dis.
LYKOSS (LIE-KOSS)	First Attendant to Ba'Tar Og'Adi.
JOROQ (JORE-OCK)	Ba'Tar Og'Adi's new First Attendant after Lykoss is killed.
KYOWA (KYOWE-UH)	Kerosi's mother. Kyowa returned to the mainland while Kerosi and her Father stayed in the Azai Kingdom.
SURAI (SOO-RYE)	Leader of an archeological expedition searching for the entrance to the fabled underground city of Og'Arta.
IWA (EYE-WAH)	Assistant to Surai on their archeological expedition across Aq'Adez.
OB'AKE (OB-OCK-AY)	A bookseller from Yubikot.
WAQIR (WOCK-EER)	A brash and volatile A'ji insurrectionist who leads a team of <i>sand demons</i> .

CHILDREN
OF THE
CRIMSON
INSURRECTION
MAPS





the TEAR

the BLIGHTED LANDS

Ur'EOS

ARKUS

the SWAMP of SVKAG

the SIRA DESERT

the PARBIDDEN WASTES

Ar'kor

Ar'mot

Ar'as

Qi'ARSUS

Tul

Zan

Hn'da

Hi'yon

New Arkus

the WOODS

ASMITA

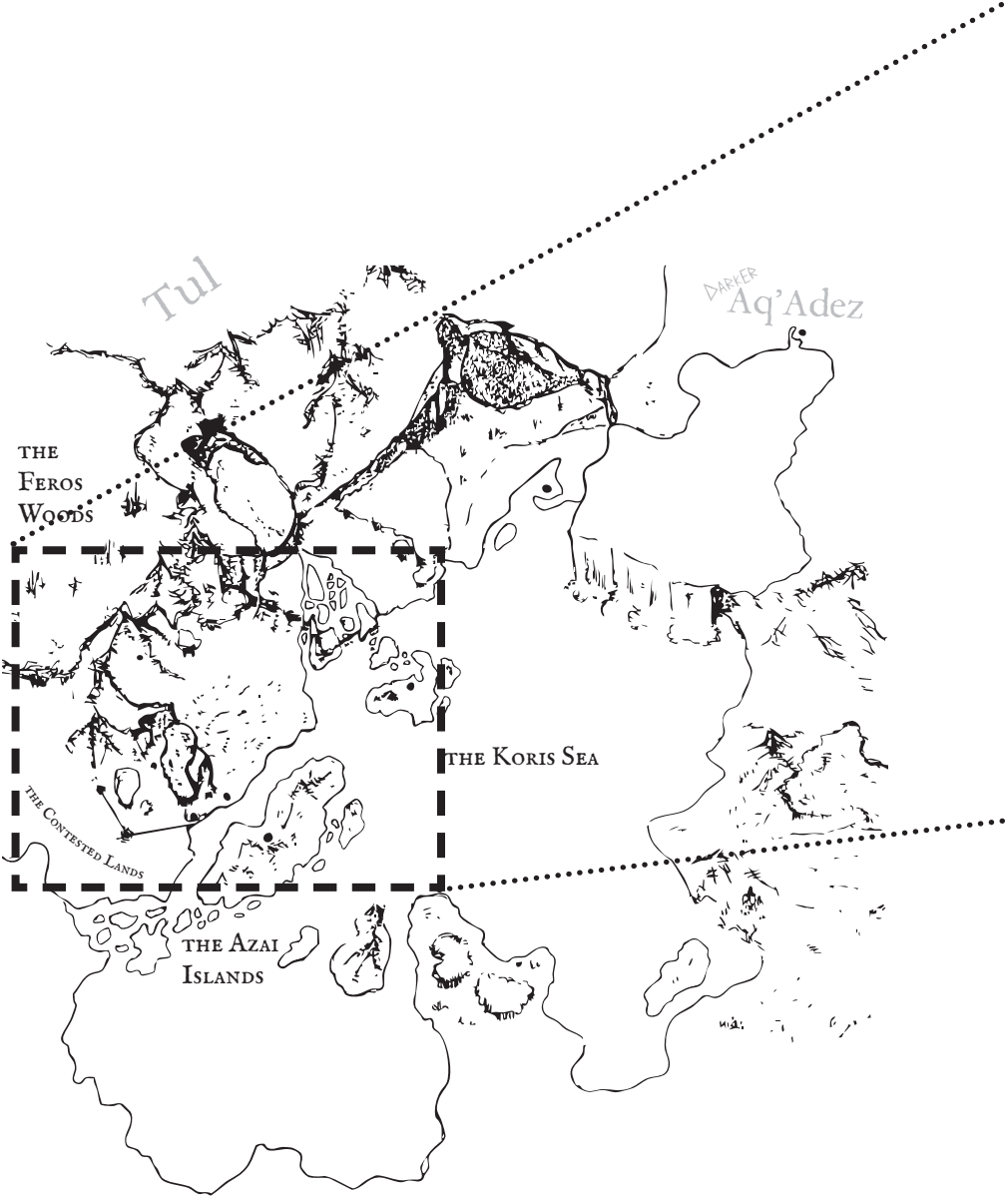
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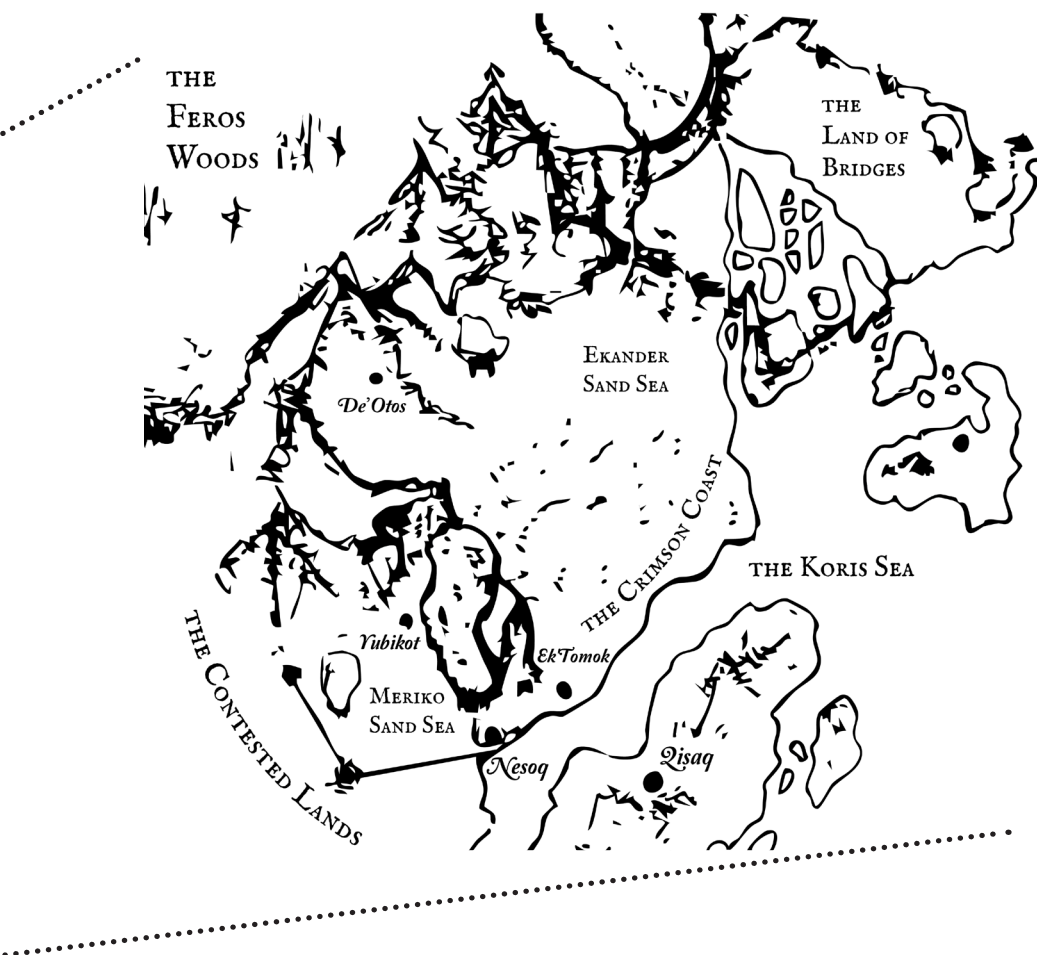
ASMITA





MAP OF ^{LIGHTER} Aq'Adez





CHILDREN OF THE CRIMSON INSURRECTION

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Joel Grey lives in Southern Manitoba, Canada with wife, Cori Grey, their dog, Roxy, and their cats, Bella and Winchester.

OTHER NOVELS BY JOEL GREY

THE SHADOW IN THE DARKNESS
PARANOIA
APPARITIONS AND PREMONITIONS

THE **HARNESSING CHAOS** SERIES

MOKI AND THE ERASED ONES
TERO AND THE CAVE OF THE ANCIENTS
YRSA AND THE NIGHT WASTES
BIORIX AND THE CULT OF CAR'TOXIS
KESS AND THE CURSE OF THE LABYRINTH
OSTER AND THE SWAMP OF THE SOUL EATERS
R'NOX AND THE DOOR IN THE MAW
GHOSTS OF THE BLIGHTED LANDS
CHILDREN OF THE CRIMSON INSURRECTION

THE O U R O B O R O S TRILOGY

TWELVE
HAPPINESS IN SLAVERY
THE WATCHERS